

Confronting a Miracle: How Americans Adapted a Hockey Victory into a Symbol of National  
Pride

By

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For Mr. Coomes and Mrs. Willmon:

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the cultural phenomenon known as the Miracle on Ice. The research covers the period from the team's selection in the summer of 1979 to the present-day utilization of their story by those within various culturally significant American institutions. While the game is often remembered as a historic sporting event that profoundly impacted those living during the American Cold War era, this project examines the narrative development of the Miracle, its evolution into a myth, and the diverse ways in which individuals in different contexts have invoked it to meet their needs and interests. By defeating the formidable Soviet hockey team, the young American players not only revitalized a sense of American exceptionalism following a time of disappointment but also established a lasting self-legitimizing myth. As we move further away from 1980, the significance of this victory remains relevant, shaping a nationalistic mythology that continues to resonate with the public.

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## **Preface**

On a cold winter night in February 2004, significant events were taking place in the United States. George W. Bush was starting the final year of his first presidential term, and the country was deep into a two-front war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, a less notable event was occurring. Just a few days before, I celebrated my sixth birthday, and on this night my Mom, Dad, Grandmother and brother all decided to take me to our local cinema in Murfreesboro, TN, to mark the occasion. I have always loved sports, especially sports movies, so we chose to see the recently released film *Miracle*, starring Kurt Russell. The film compellingly retold the story of a group of unlikely amateur hockey players from the U.S. who united to defeat a dominant Soviet team at the 1980 Winter Olympics.

On a practical level, I found it challenging to grasp the complex implications of the game presented in the film. At that age, I struggled with understanding calendars, let alone the intricate socio-political elements tied to the game in the movie. For instance, I recall feeling confused on the drive to the theater about why my older brother and I were only a year apart. My parents had always told me we were two years apart, yet at that moment, he was seven and I was six. I had not fully realized that since we were 18 months apart, there was a brief period each year when we were technically just a year apart in age. I was not completely aware of how time functioned, but the filmmaker's compelling retelling of a patriotic American story of triumph against the odds deeply resonated with me even as a child. This movie sparked a lifelong fascination with the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team and their underdog journey, which inspired me to write this thesis.

Over the past twenty years, my parents have divorced, and my grandmother has recently passed away. When I reflect on that time, most of the memories have faded, but this one night

stands out vividly. On that occasion, I not only experienced the comfort of a united family but also witnessed a mythological narrative where good triumphed over evil. I did not realize it then, but that night marked my initial impressions of the Cold War. Throughout the movie, the filmmaker portrayed the Americans, my people, as the confident and youthful force, and depicted the Soviets as outdated and archaic. This perspective considerably influenced how I viewed the world at that time, as I was too young to understand the complexities of the Cold War, which required looking beyond a hockey game to the socio-political context. To me, the Cold War seemed straightforward: America represented the good, youthful force advocating for the underdog, while the Soviets embodied an opposing, archaic force intent on dismantling the vision we Americans had for the world. These impressions remained with me throughout my childhood and continue to instinctively shape my interpretation of that whole era and what it means to be an American.

This thesis exists due to the retelling of the team's story, which has evolved into a mythology that people use to fulfill their needs and interests across different contexts.

## Introduction

On a winter night in February of 1980, two Olympic hockey teams played a game in a small upstate New York community called Lake Placid. The two teams featured very different pedigrees. The team sitting on the left side of the bench were the Americans, a young group of amateur players with an average age of twenty-one. The public perceived the players on this team as being unexceptional and inexperienced; therefore, the expectations for the team were reasonably low. Just days before the Olympic opening ceremony, their coach, Herb Brooks, stated that his team winning a bronze medal in Lake Placid would be the equivalent of winning the gold in previous Olympics.<sup>1</sup>

Brooks had reasonable expectations for his team, especially considering the formidable opponent to their right—the Soviets. Many viewed this Soviet team as the best hockey team in the world, particularly after their recent triumph over the NHL All-Star team in a best-of-three series in 1979.<sup>2</sup> Their exceptional reputation was further solidified by winning the last four Olympic gold medals, dating back to the 1964 Olympics in Innsbruck. Over that sixteen-year period, the Soviets lost only one Olympic hockey game.<sup>3</sup> They entered this match with few believing their second loss in the last sixteen years would come at the hands of the Americans; after all, they soundly defeated this same U.S. team just thirteen days prior in an exhibition match.

Despite the expectation for Soviet success, the American team accomplished the seemingly impossible by defeating the Soviet juggernaut and propelling themselves as the favorites to win the Gold medal. The impact of the U.S. victory for the populace was immense, as more than thirty-

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<sup>1</sup> Stogel, C. (1980, February 10). Soviets Bury Americans. *The Journal News*, 2D.

<sup>2</sup> (1979, February 11). The Empty Cup. *The New York Times*, S5.

<sup>3</sup> Coffey, W. R. (2005). *The boys of winter : the untold story of a coach, a dream, and the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team*, (p. 17). Thorndike Press.

four million Americans tuned in to watch the game<sup>4</sup>, sending ripple effects from the rink in Lake Placid across the entire United States. Impromptu celebrations unfolded throughout the country, from Winthrop, MA to Miami, FL and all the way to the White House. Given the U.S. team's marginal expectations for success and the quality of their opponent, the American victory ultimately morphed from a historical sports event into a mythological display of American triumph, restoring a sense of American exceptionalism for a weary populace in need of hope.

Immediately following the game, the foundations of the myth were already present. For instance, President Jimmy Carter began considering "how he could translate their victory in the hockey arena to his advantage in the political arena."<sup>5</sup> Days after the conclusion of the Olympics, Carter invited the American Olympic athletes to the White House. During the ceremony, Carter declared that "For me, as President of the United States of America, this is one of the proudest moments that I've ever experienced . . . The U.S. hockey [team's victory] was one of the most breathtaking upsets not only in Olympic history but in the entire history of sport."<sup>6</sup> Carter became the first in a long line of narrators of the myth, but his attempts to leverage the U.S. hockey success to the realm of politics failed, as nearly nine months following the conclusion of the U.S. - Soviet game, Carter lost the 1980 Presidential election to Ronald Reagan.

Even as Carter departed the White House, the myth remained relevant for the new Presidential administration. During his presidency, Reagan attempted to unify the country and several times used the 1980 Olympic Hockey success as evidence of America's uniquely

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<sup>4</sup> (2010, March 1). *Minor Miracle on Ice: A Stunning Audience*. The New York Times. Retrieved October 23, 2024, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/02/sports/olympics/02sandomir.html#:~:text=That%20year%20the%20United%20States,later%2C%2032.8%20million%20tuned%20in.>

<sup>5</sup> Abelson, D.E. (2010). Politics on Ice: The United States, the Soviet Union, and a Hockey Game in Lake Placid. (p. 85) Canadian Review of American Studies.

<sup>6</sup> Conway, A. (2009). *Gold: a celebration of the 1980 US Olympic hockey team*. 21st Editions, Incorporated.

uncommon status. Despite possessing nearly opposite political positions, Reagan and Carter's comments on the 1980 American hockey victory are shockingly similar. Reagan declared the hockey team to be "America's hometown team"<sup>7</sup> who became "a national symbol . . . [that] those who play fair and by the rules, that nice guys in a tough world can finish first."<sup>8</sup> Carter continued to express similar sentiments towards the team later in his life, describing the outcome of the game as "not only a physical victory, but an ideological, even spiritual triumph."<sup>9</sup> He also described the impact of the game as representing "a success as meaningful in its own nuanced way as the Berlin Airlift or the Apollo moon landing."

Decades following President Reagan and President Carter's administrations, President Donald Trump expressed similar sentiment towards the team's victory. Speaking a day before the 40th anniversary of the U.S. - Soviet game, Trump stated that the game perhaps represented "the single greatest moment in the history of sports" given his belief that the underdog U.S. team defeated the "the greatest [hockey] team ever assembled."<sup>10</sup> However, President Trump and his staff, unique to his Presidential counterparts, manipulated the team's story to divide the nation along increasingly polarizing political lines. This utilization of the team's legacy by the most powerful politicians in the United States reveals the game's lasting cultural impact and power. Despite the differing political agendas of these three Presidents, they share a consensus

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<sup>7</sup> Reagan, R. (1983, September 29). Remarks on greeting members of the Washington Capitals and United States Olympic hockey teams [Political speech transcript]. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-greeting-members-washington-capitals-and-united-states-olympic-hockey-teams>

<sup>8</sup> Reagan, R. (1987, September 24) Remarks to the United States Olympic hockey team [Speech transcript]. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-united-states-olympic-hockey-team#:~:text=September%2024%2C%201987&text=But%20all%20of%20us%20are,permanently%20captured%20the%20American%20imagination.>

<sup>9</sup> Conway, A. (2009). *Gold: A celebration of the 1980 US Olympic hockey team*. 21st Editions, Incorporated.

<sup>10</sup> Vazquez, M. (2020, February 21). *Trump joined by 'Miracle on Ice' hockey team at Las Vegas rally*. CNN Politics. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/21/politics/donald-trump-las-vegas-rally-hockey-team/index.html>

belief in the power of the team's narrative, revealing the sustaining nature and enduring appeal of this story.

The popular political narration of the myth shaped the memory many Americans have of their country's hockey triumph in Lake Placid. For many, the jubulance of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team's win over the Soviets became a cherished Cold War memory. The public largely remembers the players as amateurs chasing glory rather than riches, who etched their names into history. The team's story is often retold with orators amplifying the storybook elements of their journey to gold. The narratives that exist in the present typically describe the Americans as being an unlikely band of underdogs who stunned the world by winning the Gold Medal over the favored Czechs, Soviets, and Fins—reigniting national pride at a time when an economic downturn and withdrawal from Vietnam had begun to dampen America's post-World War II sense of greatness. Ironically, the Soviets won the overall gold medal count for the 1980 Winter Olympics,<sup>11</sup> but most in the U.S. simply remember the American hockey triumph on ice. Their victory resonated far beyond the sport, lifting a nation's spirits from Cold War gloom and reminding a weary populace of their country's potential to overcome any odds.

In the years following the Lake Placid Olympics, many Americans celebrated the game as a landmark sporting accomplishment, earning it the nickname "Miracle on Ice." For 44 years, people have told and retold the Miracle tale. They often stress the Americans' inexperience, their representation of the amateur spirit compared to the Soviets—and the Americans' ability to beat the odds when the country comes together. In the aftermath of the game, the American populace perceived the players as lacking exceptional athletic ability due to their technical status as amateur college hockey players—contributing to their collective allure. They won the gold not by being

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<sup>11</sup> *Lake Placid 1980 Medal Table*. (n.d.). Olympics. Retrieved October 23, 2024, from <https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/lake-placid-1980/medals>

better hockey players, but by embracing an “old-fashioned American work ethic.”<sup>12</sup> The elements of the story amplified by those telling the Miracle elevate the U.S. hockey victory from a simple sporting contest to a patriotic tale in the sphere of mythology.

This mythical portrayal of the 1980 U.S. Men’s Olympic Ice hockey has become part of many Americans national narrative, but as with any myth, it leaves out key facts and strategically emphasizes some facts over others. For instance, the Soviets faced accusations of professionalism from publications like *The New York Times*<sup>13</sup> because their players were “active” military members who just happened to play hockey for most of the year and received compensation, such as “cars, nice apartments, [and] vacation places on the Black Sea.”<sup>14</sup> However, athletes from other nations also manipulated the International Olympic Committee’s rules on amateurism.<sup>15</sup> Many players on the U.S. hockey team were recent NHL draftees who skipped their last years of college eligibility to represent their country in the Olympics, thus drawing into question their status as true amateurs. Notably, Mike Ramsey joined the 1980 team right after becoming the earliest selected American in the history of the National Hockey League (NHL) draft.<sup>16</sup> Ramsey and other players’ decision to delay their professional career was likely also influenced by the \$700,000 budget<sup>17</sup> that the team used to pay the young players, keeping them from signing with NHL teams.

Within the myth of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team, the majority of the emphasis falls solely on the game between the U.S. and the Soviets. However, the game against America’s Cold War rivals was not even the gold-medal game. Instead, they achieved their ultimate victory against

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<sup>12</sup> Swift, E. (1980, December 22). A Reminder of What We Can Be. *Sports Illustrated*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Washburn, J. N. (1974, July 21). Soviet amateur athlete: A real pro. *The New York Times*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Coffey, W. R. (2005). *The boys of winter : the untold story of a coach, a dream, and the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team*, (p. 33). Thorndike Press.

<sup>15</sup> Greene, B. (2012, July 23). *What changed the Olympics forever*. CNN.com. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2012/07/22/opinion/greene-olympics-amateurs/index.html>

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, August 10). North Stars delighted with NHL draft choices. *Star Tribune*, 1D.

<sup>17</sup> Soucheray, J. (1979, September 26). Joe Soucheray. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

Finland two days later to capture the gold. The depiction of the Soviets as the ultimate victory therefore reveals how the narrators of the Miracle have constructed a flexible narrative structure, capable of accommodating their specific needs and interests, in addition to their contemporary circumstances.

Despite the reality that highly talented players were on the roster of the U.S. team, several of whom went on to successful careers as professional hockey players, the most appealing narrative of the Miracle on Ice remains the one in which the U.S. players pursue an impossible dream as hopeless underdogs. Through embellishments and fabrications by generations of storytellers, the public's accepted narrative of the Miracle on Ice has strayed from the team's true journey to gold. For numerous reasons within the institutions of sports, media, and politics, storytellers have emphasized, exaggerated, or entirely fabricated the mythical nature of the Miracle. This study explores inconsistencies within a prominent example of American mythology and unveils the mechanisms that transform historical events into mythical narratives.

The discrepancies in the accepted narrative surrounding the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team do not fully align with the team's actual experiences laid out within primary sources, thus, revealing that their journey to gold shares similarities with other mythological tales and, like the stories of old, their story also inspired many to believe in their country's unique status. While the outcome of the U.S. - Soviet Olympic hockey game likely had a minimal effect on the broader Cold War dynamics, its significance highlights that Americans, despite their perception of being the pinnacle of human civilization, still depend heavily on mythology, similar to other civilizations, to interpret their surroundings and understand their place in the world.

## The Team

The U.S. team's underdog status compared to the Soviets significantly contributed to their appeal among many Americans. A lackluster performance against the Soviet team in an exhibition game, set against a backdrop of national vulnerability, highlighted that it would take an extraordinary series of events for the Americans to achieve an upset over the favored Soviets in the Olympics. On February 8, 1980, just a few days prior to the opening of the Olympic Games, the Soviet national team easily defeated the US team in an exhibition game by a final score of 10 to 3.<sup>18</sup> The outcome of this game left the U.S. team in a challenging position for the upcoming Winter Olympics, as they now saw themselves as the underdogs compared to the Soviet team. U.S. coach, Herb Brooks, expressed his concern not about the result of this game but about how the loss could impact the team's ability to compete against "the Swedes and the Czechs," whom he believed they had an actual chance to defeat, as he expected success against the Soviets was unrealistic.<sup>19</sup>

While the game took place in New York City, there were two crises unfolding internationally, leading many Americans to doubt the country's ability to protect their own citizens and allies. The game between the Olympians occurred forty-seven days after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan<sup>20</sup>, a stark reminder to many Americans that the Cold War was still ongoing as the Soviets continued to display territorial aggression. Additionally, it was ninety-seven days after Iranian students took fifty American citizens hostage in Tehran.<sup>21</sup> The Carter administration's

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<sup>18</sup> (1980, February 10). Russia Routs U.S. In Hockey by 10-3; Soviet Coach Puzzled Soviet Six Routs U.S. By 10-3 Spectacular Goal. *The New York Times*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Eruzione, M., & Boudette, N. E. (2020). *The making of a miracle : the untold story of the captain of the 1980 gold medal-winning US Olympic hockey team* (1st ed.). p. 123). Harper, an imprint of HarperCollings Publishers.

<sup>20</sup> (1979, December 22). Soviet buildup seen at Afghan frontier. *The New York Times*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> (1979, November 5). Tehran students seize U.S. Embassy and hold hostages. *The New York Times*, 1.

inability to resolve the Iranian hostage crisis became a symbol of America's declining global influence. Nightly news reports by Walter Cronkite and others kept the crisis at the forefront of public consciousness.<sup>22</sup> This constant media coverage fueled a growing sense of national powerlessness, leaving Americans feeling increasingly vulnerable to events beyond their borders.

Despite the prevailing atmosphere of disappointment, as officials in Washington grappled with their diplomatic failures and a young hockey team faced an embarrassing defeat, a narrative began to take shape. The 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team found themselves in a unique position, as they would have the opportunity to challenge the Soviets again in the upcoming Winter Games—assuming they qualified for the medal round. If the team defeated the highly favored Soviets just days after their lopsided defeat, it had the potential to become a generational defining moment, representing not just a hockey victory but also a international reminder of American strength.

The prevailing perception of the American hockey team as hopeless underdogs is, however, quite misleading. Many of the players, including Mike Ramsey, Neal Broten, Dave Christian, and Ken Morrow, went on to become some of the most accomplished American-born athletes in the sport's history. The Buffalo Sabers drafted Ramsey seven months prior and went on to play in over 1,000 NHL games for the Buffalo Sabres, Pittsburgh Penguins, and Detroit Red Wings.<sup>23</sup> With the last pick of the 2nd round in the 1979 NHL draft, the Minnesota North Stars drafted Broten, who joined Ramsey in playing over 1,000 NHL games.<sup>24,25</sup> He later won a Stanley Cup with the New Jersey Devils and was the first American-born player to score over 100 points in an NHL season.<sup>26</sup> Dave Christian also played over 1,000 NHL games and scored over 30 goals four

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<sup>22</sup> [Dave W]. (2020, March 31). *CBS Evening News November 12-14, 1979* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvX25IG4tvY>

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert, J. (2019). *Miracle in Lake Placid: The Greatest Hockey Story Ever Told* (p. 151). Simon and Schuster.

<sup>24</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, August 10). North Stars delighted with NHL draft choices. *Star Tribune*, 4D.

<sup>25</sup> Gilbert, J. (2019). *Miracle in Lake Placid: the greatest hockey story ever told* (p. 152). Simon and Schuster.

<sup>26</sup> (1986, March 27). Broten hits 100: Stars' center first U.S. Player to hit mark. *St. Cloud Times*, 27.

times in his professional career.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Ken Morrow won 4 consecutive Stanley Cups for the New York Islanders, including one a few months after winning the gold in Lake Placid.<sup>28</sup>

All of these players began their professional careers shortly after the 1980 Winter Olympics. Contrary to today's common perception, they were highly talented individuals. Ultimately, the accepted narrative surrounding the Lake Placid Winter Olympics is often built upon exaggerations or complete fabrications. These embellishments have created the perfect soil for a nationalistic myth with patriotic overtones to grow in its scope and significance, allowing the country to construct meaning out of an underdog hockey team whose victory restored a sense of American exceptionalism after the tumultuous events of 1979.

## **The Myth**

As the U.S. team approached their upcoming rematch against the Soviet hockey team, the implications and impact of the game stretched far beyond the hockey rink. For many, the game became emblematic of a small-scale confrontation between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Their eventual victory over the Soviet juggernaut created a moment of unity for a country feeling increasingly pessimistic and divided. This allowed the story to evolve beyond the hockey rink and into the sphere of American mythos. Following the events in Lake Placid, the enduring myth surrounding the 1980 U.S. team has been upheld through collective remembrance, allowing its implications to resonate with the evolving landscape of America in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. For many Americans, storytellers have shaped their recollection of the remarkable events of the 1980 Winter Olympics by emphasizing the mythical aspects of the team's journey

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<sup>27</sup> Allen, K. (2015, February 21). *Talented 1980 Olympic team didn't need miracles*. USA Today. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nhl/columnist/allen/2015/02/21/miracle-on-ice-35th-anniversary-hockey-1980-olympics/23790097/>

<sup>28</sup> Gilbert, J. (2019). *Miracle in Lake Placid: the greatest hockey story ever told* (p. 150). Simon and Schuster.

while possibly overlooking elements that do not align with their intended narratives. The team's achievements continued to gain prominence as the decades passed, retaining a lasting impact on various sectors, including the general American public, sports executives, the mass media, and even high-ranking political figures in the United States.

### *Personal evocations*

As Americans grappled with an increasingly uncertain world, the populace continued to draw meaning from the story of the Miracle on Ice in their personal lives, finding in it evidence of their exceptional status on the world stage and the strength of the traditional working-class citizen. In the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, many Americans once again felt a sense of anxiety over the future of the country. Concerns arose among Americans about the potential location of the next terrorist attack, and they later worried about the country's military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan because they were uncertain whether the two wars would conclude like the conflict in Vietnam and Indochina. Amidst this national fear following 9/11, the story of the Miracle on Ice became more relevant to the public—as their elicitation of American strength and resolve once again reminded a weary populace of their countries long standing perseverance.

### *Sports evocations*

As the turn of the century approached, the 1980 U.S. hockey team continued to hold a significant place in American sports history. Throughout the 20th century, the Olympics served as a platform for athletes to demonstrate America's strength and resilience during challenging times. For example, Jesse Owens' achievements at the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics challenged the theory of Aryan superiority embraced by the Nazi regime. In 2002, U.S. Olympic organizers recognized that the players from the Miracle on Ice also symbolized American tenacity and

capitalized on the team's legendary status by inviting them to ceremonially kick off the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, where they lit the cauldron during the opening ceremony.<sup>29</sup> American Olympic executives included symbols from the attack throughout the event to serve as a powerful reminder of America's resolve in the face of adversity following the September 11th terrorist attacks.<sup>30,31</sup> The ceremony, centered on a theme of American resilience and offered the public an opportunity to reflect on the Lake Placid Winter Olympics, a story that inspired hope by showcasing how a group of underdog hockey players came together to conquer a formidable opponent and became a tangible symbol of America's ability to overcome adversity for the public.

### **Myth-making in sports**

James Oliver Robertson argues in *American Myth, American Reality* that despite the contemporary West claiming to be too rational for myths, Americans continue to depend heavily on mythology as a pivotal component in the substantive meaning-making process.<sup>32</sup> He claims that the cultures that preceded us, including the Egyptians, Sumerians, Chinese, Greeks, and Romans, used myths and complicated mythologies to understand their lived experiences. According to Robertson, despite a general belief that these societies are primitive relative to our modern culture which emphasizes science and reason, we still use mythology to interpret life's realities in the

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<sup>29</sup> Arrillaga, P. (2002, February 10). Olympic ideals: Miracle guys perfect. Portland Press Herald, 13D.

<sup>30</sup> New York Police officers and fire fighters served as honorary body guards and New York police officer Daniel Rodriguez sang God Bless America

<sup>31</sup> Hamburger, J. (2022, February 8). The park record in 2002: Opening ceremonies mixes patriotism with Olympic spectacle. The Park Record. Retrieved from <https://www.parkrecord.com/2022/02/08/the-park-record-in-2002-opening-ceremonies-mixes-patriotism-with-olympic-spectacle/#:~:text=New%20York%20policeman%20Daniel%20Rodriguez,last%20country%20to%20be%20introduced.>

<sup>32</sup> Robertson, J. O. (1980). *American myth, American reality* (1st ed p. 6). Hill & Wang.

present.<sup>33</sup> The largely unconscious utilization of mythology from a perceived more rational Western society has resulted in a continued necessity for creating heroes.

The modern sports star embodies the mythological hero archetype in a manner that resonates with today's society. Their achievements are more tangible than those of ancient heroes, which allows them to capture the admiration of a populace rooted in empiricism. In his book *Dreaming of Heroes*, Michael Oriard argues that the athlete-hero represents an alluring embodiment of the self-made American man.<sup>34</sup> Unlike traditional heroes such as soldiers, the athlete-hero remains a prominent example of a modern-day mythological hero. The 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team members effectively personified the type of athlete-hero Oriard describes, as they all hailed from working-class families. Also, their technical classification as amateurs allowed their legacy within the myth to depict them as largely untalented and unspectacular. In the face of this perceived adversity, the team leveraged their traditional American work ethic to achieve what *Sports Illustrated* has termed "the greatest sporting moment of the 20th century."<sup>35</sup>

## **Sources & Methodology**

This thesis is a qualitative study that heavily relies on primary sources, including newspaper articles from prominent publications like *The Star Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, as well as memoirs of players, journalists, and politicians involved in the 1980 Winter Olympics. These sources provide a unique perspective on the Miracle on Ice, enabling the researcher to observe the 1980 U.S. hockey team's most significant moments. Through an analysis of these sources, it becomes apparent that the team's remarkable

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<sup>33</sup> Robertson, J. O. (1980). *American myth, American reality* (1st ed p. XVI). Hill & Wang.

<sup>34</sup> Oriard, M. (1982). *Dreaming of heroes : American sports fiction, 1868-1980* (p. 48-51). Nelson-Hall.

<sup>35</sup> Eruzione, M., & Boudette, N. E. (2020). *The making of a miracle : the untold story of the captain of the 1980 gold medal-winning US Olympic hockey team* (First edition p. 241-242). Harper, an imprint of HarperCollings Publishers.

ascent to success can be best understood as a self-legitimizing myth. The methodology of this project draws significant influence from Dr. Fredrick Corney's scholarly work, particularly his book *Telling October* in which he argues that in the aftermath of the October Revolution, the act of remembering transcended traditional linear storytelling, with fragments of the story assembled to create "a radically new relation among parts of a whole."<sup>36</sup> Throughout this thesis, I contend that similar to the October Revolution in Russia, the American recollection of the gold medal-winning hockey campaign in 1980 is fragmented, with certain widely accepted assertions about the team remaining unverifiable by the original source material from Lake Placid and beyond.

This thesis methodology indicates that the most relevant part of the myth is when the U.S. triumphs over their Cold War rival—the Soviets. Therefore, the team's ultimate victory was not their win to achieve the gold medal against Finland but their semifinal triumph over the Soviets, who were America's greater sociopolitical and hockey rivals. Additionally, the team's legacy is most powerful when the populace perceives the players as hopeless underdogs, often leading storytellers to downplay their true talent. These factors collectively contribute to the team's legacy, expanding to where it is best understood today as a mythic representation of American exceptionalism.

This thesis consists of three chronological body chapters that display how the narrative surrounding the team originated and developed over the past half-century. The first chapter of this thesis focuses exclusively on the team's journey from their selection in July 1979 to their arrival in Lake Placid for the 1980 Winter Olympics. When analyzing the myth of the Miracle on Ice, the researcher must take a step back from current beliefs about the team and gain a deeper understanding by examining what people believed about the team before their story captured the

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<sup>36</sup> Corney, F. (2018). *Telling October : memory and the making of the Bolshevik revolution* (p. 184). Cornell University Press.

interest of the American public. Chapter one examines primary sources from various newspapers and magazines, including *The Star Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, and *Sports Illustrated*. The chapter reveals that Americans have constructed many beliefs about the Miracle on Ice through exaggerations or fabrications, contributing to the enduring mythical appeal of the story.

The second chapter of this project shares similar themes with chapter one but instead analyzes how the narrative surrounding the team changed as they traversed the Olympic games and eventually defeated the vaunted Soviets. The primary sources cited throughout this chapter predominantly consist of newspaper articles, magazines, and memoirs originating from the team's experience in Lake Placid during the 1980 Winter Olympics. Ultimately, the mass media's portrayal of the players during the Winter Olympics contributed to their appeal, as their coverage depicted them as untalented amateurs who achieved success through their adherence to traditional American values of hard work and perseverance, rather than possessing greater talent than their opponents. This chapter displays that the team's coverage during the Olympics laid a foundation for the creation of a self-legitimizing myth.

Chapter three of this project is unique to its predecessors in the range of time studied and in sources utilized. Rather than limiting this chapter to a span of a few weeks or months, it analyzes the various ways in which people elicited the myth throughout the last 44 years. The research for this chapter relies on newspaper and magazine articles and new sources like political memoirs, speeches, and multimedia outlets such as documentaries and feature films to support its claims. This chapter reveals that the myth of the Miracle on Ice remains a potent display of America's excellence into the early 21st century. Storytellers have constructed the public's collective memory

of the 1980 U.S. hockey team through embellishments and fabrications, leveraging the team's legacy to a place of cultural mythology for the average American.

## **Historiography**

Of the existing scholarship on the Miracle on Ice, this study draws heavily on two pieces of scholarly research from Donald Abelson and Alexandra Mountain.

Alexandra Mountain's "Rethinking a Miracle: The Role of Whiteness in the 1980 Miracle on Ice"<sup>37</sup> argues that the legacy of The Miracle on Ice is deeply intertwined with racial and class narratives that are frequently overlooked in existing scholarly research. Mountain employs an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates historical analysis, cultural criticism, and race studies, including critical race theory, to unpack the racialized narratives associated with this event.

Throughout the article, she references a variety of sources, including W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* and academic works on The Miracle on Ice, such as Donald Abelson's "Politics on Ice: The United States, the Soviet Union, and a Hockey Game in Lake Placid," as well as Mary McDonald's analysis titled "'Miraculous' masculinity meets militarization: Narrating the 1980 USSR-US men's Olympic ice hockey match and Cold War politics." The study also incorporates perspectives from sports journalists, including Wayne Coffey in *The Boys of Winter* and John Powers and Arthur Kaminsky in *One Goal*. Additionally, the article quotes political speeches by President Ronald Reagan and President Donald Trump. Mountain references previous research in critical sports studies, particularly the work of Michael Silk, Bryan Bracy, and Mark Falcous in "Performing America's Past: Cold War Fantasies in a Perpetual State of War."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Mountain, A. (2022). Rethinking a miracle: The role of whiteness in the 1980 Miracle on Ice. *Journal of Olympic Studies*, 3(1), 96-112. <https://doi.org/10.5406/26396025.3.1.06>

<sup>38</sup> Found in *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War*.

The author frames the article through a critical race theory lens and expresses a critical stance toward the conservative politicians she quotes, suggesting she likely possesses a progressive viewpoint that may reflect some bias against figures like Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan.

The central thesis of “Politics on Ice: The United States, the Soviet Union, and a Hockey Game in Lake Placid”<sup>39</sup> by Donald Abelson is that the Miracle on Ice transcended a remarkable athletic achievement, serving instead as a politicized expression of nationalism. Abelson employs a multidisciplinary research methodology, integrating historical analysis through primary and secondary sources alongside insights from political science to support his research. The article also includes a comparative study that contrasts the Miracle on Ice with another notable Cold War hockey event—the Summit Series, referencing Phil Esposito and Peter Golenbeck’s memoir, *Thunder and Lightning: A No B.S. Hockey Memoir*.

The author utilizes a variety of sources, including existing scholarship on the Miracle on Ice, with a focus on Mary McDonald's work "'Miraculous' masculinity meets militarization: Narrating the 1980 USSR-US men's Olympic ice hockey match and Cold War politics." He references sports journalists, such as Wayne Coffey in *The Boys of Winter* and John Powers and Arthur Kaminsky in *One Goal*. Furthermore, the author includes primary media coverage by referencing pregame remarks by broadcaster Al Michaels. The article utilizes the HBO documentary *Do You Believe in Miracles?* featuring interviews with American players and sports journalists covering the team in Lake Placid.

The author shows some bias in their critique of President Carter's political use of the Miracle on Ice, suggesting a belief that politicians should prioritize sound policy positions over cultural nationalism in their campaigns. By emphasizing political interpretations of the event rather

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<sup>39</sup> Abelson, D.E. (2010). Politics on Ice: The United States, the Soviet Union, and a hockey game in Lake Placid. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 40(1), 63-94. <https://doi.org/10.1353/crv.0.0057>

than the players' athletic accomplishments, the author aims primarily to contribute to the field of political science, which could restrict the broader scope of the research.

This research project draws on these previously mentioned pieces of scholarship on the Miracle on Ice through the use of similar sources and methodology; however, the scope and outlook of this project differs significantly from these other scholarly articles. For instance, none of these studies examine the Miracle on Ice as mythology but instead analyze the ramifications of the team's victory and specifically how that victory resonated with millions of Americans personally and culturally. This project significantly contributes to the field of historiography on the Miracle on Ice by analyzing the cultural and personal impact of this specific game and examining how this story transformed into a myth through its impact on the country and how people have interpreted and used this myth over time to serve their needs and interests in specific contexts.

### **The Implication**

As Americans become further removed from the 1980 Winter Olympics, the retelling of the Miracle on Ice has taken on a mythical quality, with storytellers often embellishing the details to create a narrative that resonates deeply with the public. However, a careful examination of primary sources reveals that this popular narrative of the Miracle on Ice may not always align perfectly with the historical facts. This pattern reflects a broader trend in contemporary American society, where powerful myths often emerge from the selective amplification of key elements to underscore their national significance. The unintentional embellishments in these cherished myths suggest that, like societies throughout history, contemporary Western society is drawn to stories that tap into our deepest human desires. In the winter of 1980, a team of young Americans gifted the nation with such a story, surpassing the impact and importance of most other sporting events.

## Chapter 1 - Before Olympics

In the aftermath of the U.S. victory over the highly favored Soviets in the 1980 Olympics, many were quick to point out the underdog nature of the team's victory. For instance, President Jimmy Carter described the game as being much more "than an Olympic upset, more than the underdogs defeating the [favorites]" but an all-time great underdog story where "unknown, working-class American young men had defeated the all-powerful, seasoned Soviet professional team who, months earlier, conquered a team of NHL All-Stars in the 1979 Challenge Cup." President Ronald Reagan expressed similar sentiments, stating that the 1980 U.S. team represented a "storybook [victory]" where "young American athletes, given little chance for the gold medal, won against far more experienced opponents." While in Lake Placid for the 1980 Winter Olympics, Vice President Walter Mondale also expressed similar sentiments to both Carter and Reagan saying that "[Americans] don't have to prove our way of life is better through state-run sports; we can do it through amateur bodies." These statements from various political figures all reveal that the underdog persona became a central theme surrounding the team following their victory over the Soviets; however, as evidenced by the research in this chapter, this claim is misleading.

The months of media coverage from the U.S. team's inception leading up to their arrival in Lake Placid for the 1980 Winter Olympics challenges the validity of the team's status as inexperienced amateurs who were the underdogs. In many ways, the myth of the Miracle on Ice best captures the public's imagination when they see the team as unlikely underdogs; however, a closer examination of newspaper and magazine articles from publications including *The New York Times*, *Star Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, and *Sports Illustrated* raises questions about the team's identity as both amateurs and underdogs. In the public perception of the Miracle on Ice, the

mythic elements of the story have become more central to the team's overall narrative, while aspects that do not align with the myth have diminished. This exaggeration of the team's identity and the alteration of critical details of the story reveal that the Miracle on Ice has become a self-legitimizing myth.

### **Beginning of a myth**

The first coverage of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team came during their time at the National Sports Festival in Colorado Springs on July 26, 1979. The festival hosted over 2,300 of the best athletes in the United States across 31 sports all competing against each other in hopes of securing their places on the various U.S. national teams.<sup>40</sup> Olympic Committee president Robert Kane launched the festival to ensure the country had the best athletes competing in the upcoming Olympic Games. The festival allowed coach Herb Brooks to bring together many of the nation's top amateur hockey players.

When Brooks applied to coach the Olympic team, he requested permission to select the roster using a tournament structure. John Gilbert, a journalist writing about the team in the *Star Tribune*, stated that they would construct the teams based on their regions.<sup>41</sup> Divided into four regional teams, each competed against the others to determine who was worthy of a spot on the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team. The players also individually participated in physical and psychological tests to determine their compatibility with each other and their new head coach, Herb Brooks. He believed this was a perfect way to cut out the politics that supposedly burdened the team selection process in the past, as it allowed input from "every imaginable U.S. source" including representatives from every division I and II college in the United States and the NHL's

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<sup>40</sup> (1979, July 26). Sports Festival to begin. *Associated Press*.

<sup>41</sup> Gilbert, J. (2019). *Miracle in Lake Placid: the greatest hockey story ever told* (p. 18). Simon and Schuster.

central scouting staff.<sup>42</sup> Brooks believed this structure offered the team the "fairest and best selection process possible."

The team's coverage grew locally and nationally as the National Sports Festival continued. Locally, journalists emphasized the meticulous effort Brooks used to assemble the roster for the 1980 Olympic team. Nationally, the story's focus was on the dominance of the Soviet Union and the unlikely scenario the U.S. could come close to defeating them. A *New York Times* sports columnist, Gerald Eskenazi, writing about the U.S. team, mentioned that the Soviets had "routed"<sup>43</sup> the NHL All-Stars. He equated the utter dominance of this Soviet team to an Olympic basketball team defeating the NBA All-Stars so severely that it led to the NBA reconsidering the way they play the game of basketball. Still, there was some optimism about the potential of the young American team. Eskenazi also mentioned that this 1980 Hockey Team would be the "best-prepared squad we have sent"<sup>44</sup> to the Olympics, which is significant because the U.S. had sent talented hockey teams to the Olympics in the past, winning a gold medal in 1960 and a silver medal in 1972. To say this team was the best-prepared squad was a vote of confidence in the young American group.

Eskenazi also added that the 1980 Olympic team roster construction represented the "greatest commitment to hockey excellence" in the country's history. Their commitment to crafting a talented roster fractures what the modern myth claims about the team. The myth relies on the public believing the team had little chance to compete with the Soviets or any other perceived superior European team during the 1980 Winter Olympics. This belief about the myth is part of why it resonates so strongly with the American people who love to see themselves as

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<sup>42</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, August 5). Hockey. *Star Tribune*, 11C.

<sup>43</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1979, August 5). An Icy Challenge Starts. *The New York Times*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1979, August 5). An Icy Challenge Starts. *The New York Times*, 41.

the underdogs. At the team's inception in August of 1979, there was little optimism about defeating the Soviets; however, press members perceived this team as having one of the most promising chances at victory, giving people confidence that they had a shot for success in the Lake Placid Olympics.

On September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Joe Soucheray, a columnist for the *Star Tribune*, revealed that the team's budget was \$700,000,<sup>45</sup> a sizable amount designed to compensate players fairly and deter them from the large salaries professional teams were willing to pay. NHL teams already drafted many of the players on the U.S. team, and even succeeded in recruiting future Hall of Famer Joey Mullin, who decided not to play for the U.S. in the Olympics, instead agreeing to a lucrative contract and signing bonus with the St. Louis Blues of the NHL.<sup>46</sup> By the start of the Olympics, only five players did not have their professional playing rights purchased by NHL teams. The so-called amateurs had options besides playing for the U.S.; however, the team's significant budget allowed the roster to remain competitive by enticing players with professional aspirations through a tax-free \$1,100 per month stipend and a \$250,000 insurance policy if any of them happened to sustain injuries while playing for the team.<sup>47</sup>

In the same article Soucheray described the U.S. Olympic hockey team as no longer a "mystery team" or "vagabonds."<sup>48</sup> Previous U.S. Olympic hockey teams, like the 1960 gold medal winning team, used actual amateur players. Jack Kirrane, the captain of the 1960 team, was a blue-collar firefighter who took a leave of absence to lead the team to victory. In contrast, the 1980 Olympic team featured relatively well-known players talented enough to succeed in the

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<sup>45</sup> Soucheray, J. (1979, September 26). Joe Soucheray. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

<sup>46</sup> Kaplan, E., & Wyshynski, G. (2020, May 22). NHL viewers club: 'Miracle,' the story of the 1980 USA hockey team. ESPN. Retrieved from [https://www.espn.com/nhl/story/\\_/id/29200613/nhl-viewers-club-miracle-story-1980-usa-hockey-team](https://www.espn.com/nhl/story/_/id/29200613/nhl-viewers-club-miracle-story-1980-usa-hockey-team)

<sup>47</sup> Coffey, W. R. (2005). *The boys of winter : the untold story of a coach, a dream, and the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team*, (p. 127). Thorndike Press.

<sup>48</sup> Soucheray, J. (1979, September 26). Joe Soucheray. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

NHL. The team also had popularity from a local perspective because of the strong following of college hockey in Minnesota and Massachusetts. People were aware of these regional players and eager to see how they would perform at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid. The myth of the Miracle on Ice rests on the idea that the American players were amateurs plucked from obscurity who, through hard work and perseverance, could overcome enormous obstacles and defeat the best hockey team in the world, the Soviets. A closer look at the team, however, reveals that the U.S. players had established regional interest and professional potential.

### **Let The Games Begin**

The U.S. team opened their slate of games in North America in late September 1979 with a game against the Minnesota North Stars of the NHL,<sup>49</sup> representing the first time a U.S. Olympic hockey team ever played an NHL opponent. Brooks felt that if the U.S. team performed well, it would give them instant credibility and an opportunity to raise more money for their various expenses. According to Gilbert's September 29, 1979, article in the *Star Tribune*, Brooks made it sound like his players were hopeless underdogs in the game against the North Stars. Gilbert argued that Brooks' claim might be an exaggeration, as the Canadian Olympic hockey team, considered on par with the U.S. team, recently defeated Wayne Gretzky and the Edmonton Oilers 5-0.<sup>50</sup> Gilbert made it clear that there was some recent basis for believing the U.S. team could perform better than expected against the North Stars; however, the North Stars ultimately defeated the U.S. Olympic team 4-2.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, September 29). Olympic team to face N. Stars in its 'home opener'. *Star Tribune*, 56.

<sup>50</sup> Matheson, J. (1979, September 25). Olympic team scores easy win over Oilers. *Edmonton Journal*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, September 30). Stars win 4-2, deal Olympians a harsh lesson. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

The last NHL team that the Olympians played was the Washington Capitals at the upcoming site of the Winter Olympics - Lake Placid. The U.S. team performed significantly better against the Capitals than their previous three games against the North Stars, Blues, and Flames. The *Associated Press* mentioned that the U.S. team outskated the Capitals primarily due to the international-sized rink.<sup>52</sup> These rinks that the olympics featured were bigger than those that athletes used in North America, creating more space for offensive creativity. The U.S. team outshot the Capitals 31-28 but lost 5-4 when the Capitals scored a goal with 24 seconds left in regulation.

The U.S. team proved in their games against NHL opponents that they were a talented squad. Their impressive performance against some of the best professional teams in the world revealed their potential for success in the upcoming 1980 Winter Olympics. Despite some of the NHL teams beating them badly, coach Herb Brooks expressed satisfaction with his team's performance.<sup>53</sup> The team may have been relatively inexperienced when Brooks and the committee made their selection, but their thorough pre-Olympic training ensured they were well-prepared by the time they reached Lake Placid, challenging the prevailing myth.

On October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1979, the U.S. team played a familiar opponent in the University of Minnesota, as nine players in the lineup were former student athletes at the university<sup>54</sup> as was coach Herb Brooks who had also held the head coach position there since 1972. Officials from the University even dubbed it Herb Brooks Appreciation Night to honor him and their various players representing the country in the upcoming Olympics. There were nearly 14,000 people in attendance who witnessed the U.S. team defeat the Gophers convincingly by a final score of 8-

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<sup>52</sup> (1979, October 8). Capitals edge U.S. Olympic team in exhibition play. *Associated Press*, 34.

<sup>53</sup> (1979, October 3). Olympians will play Flames in N.D. Tonight. *Star Tribune*, 5C.

<sup>54</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, October 23). Gophers, Olympians not expected to draw boos tonight. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

2.<sup>55</sup> Mark Johnson led the way for the Americans, scoring three goals and assisting on another. The U.S. team played five more collegiate opponents throughout their pre-Olympic schedule and won all five games decisively.

The U.S. team next played a game against a professional opponent, the Birmingham Bulls of the Central Hockey League (CHL), the minor league affiliate of the NHL's Atlanta Flames. The team once again started goalie Jim Craig in the net. In an article by John Gilbert, he went into extensive detail on Craig's background and his standout play so far. Craig, drafted by the Atlanta Flames out of Boston University, had played exceptionally well for the U.S. Olympic team, allowing just fourteen goals in his previous eleven games.<sup>56</sup> Craig also played well for the U.S. national team and coach Herb Brooks in Moscow in the spring of 1979 during the world hockey championship tournament, winning the Most Valuable Player award. According to Gilbert, Craig had proven himself to be the number 1 goalie for the U.S. Olympic team ahead of the two other goalies (Steve Janaszak and Bruce Horsch) on the roster. The U.S. team, led by Jim Craig in net, defeated Birmingham by a final score of 5-2, securing the team's 10th consecutive victory.<sup>57</sup> Over the span of those ten games, the group had dominated their opponents—only giving up fourteen total goals thanks to Jim Craig's efforts.

The leaders of the U.S. team were beginning to shape up at this point. Newly appointed captain of the U.S. Olympic team, Mike Eruzione, netted a power-play goal, giving the U.S. team a 3-1 lead. Eruzione displayed leadership qualities that impressed coach Herb Brooks enough to name him team captain relatively early in their pre-Olympic schedule. Goalie Jim Craig was playing exceptionally well, and center Mark Johnson was the team's most talented and

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<sup>55</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, October 24). Poised Olympic six crushes Gophers 8-2. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

<sup>56</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, November 4). Olympic test. *Star Tribune*, 15C.

<sup>57</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, November 5). Olympians win 5-2 for 10th in a row. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

complete player. It is worth noting that players like Eruzione and Craig did not fit the myth of the Miracle on Ice. Jim Craig had a positive collegiate hockey record, resulting in his selection by the Atlanta Flames in the NHL draft. Eruzione also had a successful collegiate hockey career but unlike Craig, no NHL teams selected Eruzione in the draft. After playing two seasons of semiprofessional hockey for the Toledo Goaldiggers of the International Hockey League (IHL), the U.S. Olympic team selected Eruzione.<sup>58</sup> Craig and Eruzione becoming leaders for the U.S. team provides more evidence that the team included talented players with proven track records against semiprofessional and international opponents.

According to the *Star Tribune*, in November 1979, coach Herb Brooks was unlikely to return to his job at the University of Minnesota. Instead, there was a real possibility that Brooks would jump from the college ranks to the pinnacle of professional hockey—the NHL. The National Hockey League took notice of Brooks and his novel approach to hockey months prior to his successful implementation of his ideas in the Olympics. Gilbert wrote a similar article a few weeks later, discussing how the U.S. hockey team's style of play impressed everyone, including executives in the NHL.<sup>59</sup> After watching the Olympians, pro scouts stated that the group "impressed and intrigued" them. The style, which reminded the scouts of Soviet, Czechoslovak, and Swedish hockey, challenged NHL minds and forced them to realize that perhaps there is a more efficient way to play hockey. In 1979, the National Hockey League played a predictable style of hockey, whereas Herb Brooks adopted an innovative European approach characterized by efficiency. The Buffalo Sabres (NHL) were one team reportedly interested in hiring Brooks. Gilbert reiterated that Brooks was likely to accept an NHL head coaching job and would not return to coach college hockey at the University of Minnesota.

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<sup>58</sup> Concannon, J. (1979, August 1). Eruzione gets a 2nd chance. *The Boston Globe*, 41.

<sup>59</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, December 9). Hockey. *Star Tribune*, 15C.

In a game against Canada on November 27<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. Olympians struggled to figure out 27-year-old Canadian goalie Bob Dupuis, only managing to score one goal against him.<sup>60</sup> Rob McClanahan scored the goal representing his 18th of the pre-Olympic schedule, but the Canadians ultimately won the game by a score of 2-1. The U.S. team was not the first to have struggled against Dupuis. He had a 41-save shutout against the Edmonton Oilers of the NHL earlier in the season. Dupuis mentioned after the game against the U.S. Olympic team that he felt Canada had a good team that could win a medal in the upcoming Olympics. He said he thought the U.S. team was also good and could win a medal in Lake Placid. Not only were hockey executives noticing the U.S. team's potential, but hockey stars who were up close and personal with the U.S. players expressed admiration regarding their level of competition.

In a December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1979 game against the Oklahoma City Stars, the U.S. Olympians' European style of hockey annoyed opposing players. Following the game, Alex Pirus of the Stars stated, "I hate that European style of hockey. They're always weaving and doubling back to keep possession, and you never get to touch the puck."<sup>61</sup> According to Gilbert, the U.S. team's 5-2 victory over Oklahoma City represented one of the best testaments to the brilliance of Coach Herb Brooks' new system. The U.S. team outshot their CHL opponent 50-28 and their speed and creativity kept their opponents from possessing the puck. The U.S. team's success over professional teams challenges the myth's portrayal of the team's inexperience and status as underdogs. In their pre-Olympic schedule, the team competed not against other amateurs but against professional athletes. Thus, when the team arrived for the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympics, they had months of successful experience playing against professional hockey

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<sup>60</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, November 28). Canada frustrates U.S. Olympians. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

<sup>61</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, December 7). Olympic 6 tops Oklahoma City. *Star Tribune*, 1D.

players. It was not unlikely that the team's success in their previous games due to their overall talent and an annoying play style would correlate to success in the Olympics.

### **The U.S. Olympic team gets written about in *Sports Illustrated***

A *Sports Illustrated* article by journalist William Oscar Johnson in December of 1979 described the youngest U.S. Olympic hockey team as the most promising squad since the 1960 team, which won the country's first and only gold medal in hockey.<sup>62</sup> The article discussed the U.S. team's success against CHL opponents and the fact that they represented the best team in that professional league. Johnson called the U.S. players amateurs, but also mentioned that the team played against pros and their compensation was also similar to that of the pros. *Sports Illustrated* said this style of compensation was the only way a U.S. team could compete against professional amateurs playing for the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Sweden.

*Sports Illustrated* also extensively discussed the style of hockey the U.S. team utilized, crediting its implementation to head coach Herb Brooks. Johnson noted Brooks's success at the University of Minnesota where he had won three national championships while serving as head coach. Brooks' plan to acclimate his new players to the fresh style of play involved crafting a novel pre-Olympic schedule compared to previous U.S. Olympic hockey teams who usually played a an extensive but non-strenuous schedule. Previous Olympic teams typically played most of their games against college teams and occasionally international teams. However, Brooks worked out an agreement with the CHL President Bud Poile that all games against the Olympic team would count towards their league's standings. Due to this, the professional players on CHL

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<sup>62</sup> Johnson, W. O. (1979, December 10). Of gold and Gophers. *Sports Illustrated*, 59-69.

teams would have to care about the outcome of their games against the U.S. Olympians, creating a serious atmosphere of competition.

The article again mentioned that the team's budget was \$700,000, which provided the players with a comfortable amount of money. Walter Bush, Vice President of the Minnesota North Stars and a leader and advisor for the U.S. Olympic teams going back two decades, described the team as the "best... we've had in 20 years."<sup>63</sup> Bush's comments indirectly compare the team with the 1960 Olympic team, which won the gold medal in Squaw Valley. If they were on par or better than that team, the 1980 Olympians also had a shot at winning a gold medal in Lake Placid. While technically, all players on the team qualified as amateurs in the eyes of the IOC, the players spent the months leading up to the Olympics playing against professionals and receiving compensation similar to that of their opponents. The team's uniquely rigorous schedule relative to previous U.S. Olympic hockey teams prepared them for success. Thus, they arrived in Lake Placid technically as amateurs but with months of experience playing well against some of the best professional hockey teams in the world. This convinced executives to believe they could succeed in Lake Placid, a fact that further challenges the myth that the team arrived as hopeless underdogs.

Johnson concluded that if the team could advance to the 4-team medal round, the gold medal would not be an "impossibility."<sup>64</sup> He also believed the home crowd could significantly assist the young U.S. team to overachieve in the 1980 Winter Olympics. In October, the U.S. team played the Washington Capitals at the site of the upcoming Olympics, Lake Placid. The article described the crowd as providing "roaring encouragement" for the team that night. The group rose to the challenge in their game against the Capital but narrowly lost, giving up the

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<sup>63</sup> Johnson, W. O. (1979, December 10). Of Gold and Gophers. *Sports Illustrated*, 60.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, W. O. (1979, December 10). Of Gold and Gophers. *Sports Illustrated*, 69.

winning goal with 34 seconds remaining in regulation. The team played well against quality opponents but many, including head coach Herb Brooks believed the team would struggle to play well against the best team on Earth--the Soviets, who defeated the NHL All-Stars. Brooks said if the Americans had to play the Soviets, it would "be strictly a David and Goliath situation." The article ended positively, reminding the reader that David beat Goliath in that story, and with a crowd of Americans adamantly cheering them on, it could happen again.

Johnson's statement that the gold medal was not impossible challenges the myth, as it rests on a belief that the U.S. hockey team's expectations were marginal, with no one expecting the team to succeed. This exaggerated belief ultimately strengthens the myth as it reveals how unlikely of victors the young U.S. team was. The team may not have had a high chance for success, but certain people, including William Oscar Johnson from *Sports Illustrated*, believed the young American hockey team had a chance in the upcoming Olympics. Thus, the press gave the team an opportunity to succeed in the Lake Placid Olympics.

### **Pre-Olympic tournament in Lake Placid**

The U.S. team played well in a pre-Olympic tournament in Lake Placid in December of 1979, establishing themselves as a legitimate threat in the upcoming Winter Olympics. They defeated Sweden in the opening game by a final score was 4-2,<sup>65</sup> bringing the American record to 27-12-1. In their next game, the team defeated Canada by a final score of 3-1.<sup>66</sup> Eric Strobel and Phil Verchota scored goals in the 3rd period to give the U.S. team the victory. The U.S. team

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<sup>65</sup> (1979, December 17). U.S. Olympic team beats Sweden 4-2. *Associated Press*, 10C.

<sup>66</sup> Correspondent, S. (1979, December 18). U.S. Olympic hockey team defeats Canadians 3-1. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

won the tournament by defeating Czechoslovakia by a final score of 3-0;<sup>67</sup> however, they had to play one more game—against the Soviets.

The U.S. team defeated the Soviets in the tournament's last game by a score of 5-3.<sup>68</sup> Mark Johnson led the effort for the Americans, scoring three goals and one assist. According to Herb Brooks, this was just the second time an American team beat a Russian team in the previous two decades.<sup>69</sup> Notably, only the U.S. sent their top squad to Lake Placid, while the other Olympic teams traveled to Moscow for the Izvestia tournament. This gave the team valuable experience through playing against teams that utilized a similar scheme to their upcoming opponents in the Lake Placid Winter Olympics. The U.S. team played effectively in the tournament, competing against the backups for Czechoslovakia, Sweden, and the Soviet Union. This performance meant the U.S. team entered the 1980 Winter Olympics not inexperienced, as the myth says, but as one of the most successful U.S. Olympic hockey teams against international opponents since 1960.

### **The U.S. team defeats the Soviet club, the Gorky Torpedo, in a series of games**

The U.S. team played well against a Soviet club team – the Gorky Torpedo, winning all of their three games. The first score was 5-1,<sup>70</sup> the second was 4-2,<sup>71</sup> and the third was 10-3.<sup>72</sup> The Americans impressed the players on the Soviet team, who commented that it was the first time the U.S. had a "good, strong Olympic team."<sup>73</sup> The Soviet players made sure to say that a Gold or Silver medal was unlikely for the team—those all but belonged to the Soviets or

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<sup>67</sup> (1979, December 21). U.S. Olympic Six Triumphs. *New York Times*, 18.

<sup>68</sup> (1979, December 23). U.S. Team wins pre-Olympic hockey tourney. *Associated Press*, 8C.

<sup>69</sup> Wheeler, R. (1979, December 23). Young U.S. Hockey team stuns Soviet, 5-3. *Democrat and Chronicle*, 56, 59.

<sup>70</sup> (1979, December 28). U.S. Olympic team downs Soviet club. *Associated Press*, 4D.

<sup>71</sup> (1979, December 28). U.S. Olympic team tops Soviet Gorky. *Star Tribune*, 2D.

<sup>72</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, December 31). U.S. Olympians torpedo Soviets 10-3. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

<sup>73</sup> Gilbert, J. (1979, December 30). Hockey. *Star Tribune*, 4C.

Czechoslovaks—but they could compete with Sweden, Canada, Finland, and Poland for the bronze medal. Thus, not only were American hockey fans rallying behind the young team's talent, players from other countries were even giving the team a chance to win. The U.S. team was certainly the underdog relative to the Soviets; however, their success against international teams proved that they entered the Olympics with many believing they were likely to play competitively against their opponents.

### **The U.S. team plays the Soviet national team**

Just days before the U.S. team arrived in Lake Placid for the 1980 Winter Olympics, they played an exhibition game against the Soviets at Madison Square Garden. The Soviet team demonstrated their dominance, winning decisively by a score of 10-3. This result was particularly significant, as Herb Brooks stated only two days earlier that his team could use "a good kicking to bring us down to earth." Brooks's wish came true when the team suffered a disappointing loss to the Soviets.

Soviet coach Viktor Tikhonov left the game confused. He felt that the Americans left "a lot in reserve." He also stated that the Soviets "showed what [they] could do," while the Americans played poorly and failed to show they could compete against a talented team, allowing the Soviets to score at will. Brooks did not seem upset after the team's loss to the Soviets, saying, "sometimes a good kicking is good for a quality athlete and a quality team." He also said that he was sure the loss would not demoralize his team. While the other sources have primarily challenged the myth, the coverage following this game against the Soviets affirms it. Tikhonov was correct; on this night the Soviets looked like the team that easily defeated the

NHL All-Stars, while the U.S. team looked incapable of succeeding against these Soviet players. For many, the U.S. team was the definitive underdog in the upcoming Olympics.

### **Expectations for the team in Lake Placid**

Brooks worked hard to ensure the perception surrounding the team was that they were the underdogs. He emphasized the team's youthfulness and the unfortunate task of playing Czechoslovakia and Sweden in the opening round. Further solidifying his claim, the U.S. team ranked 7th out of 12 for the 1980 Winter Olympics;<sup>74</sup> however, for others the expectations for the team were still high. Jim Craig, the U.S. goalie, believed the U.S. team was "only underdogs to one team—the Russians."<sup>75</sup> Thus, like the Soviet club players, he felt the team had a legitimate chance to advance to the medal round and possibly win a medal. The team would not have to play the Soviets until the medal round, assuming they qualified.

The media also mentioned how the U.S. national team tied Czechoslovakia in last year's hockey World Championships, giving at least some precedent for believing the U.S. team could succeed in their bracket. The article concluded by making the point that, while Brooks was correct about the team's status, previous U.S. Olympic hockey squads performed well in the underdog role. The U.S. team had the same underdog status against Czechoslovakia in the World Hockey championships in 1979 and in the 1960 Winter Olympics, when they won the gold medal. Perhaps Brooks describing the team as underdogs was simply a pragmatic approach to lowering the expectations for the promising young team.

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<sup>74</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 10). U.S. hockey team is underdog in Olympics. *Star Tribune*, 5C.

<sup>75</sup> Shapiro, L. (1980, Feb 12). U.S. hockey Hopes Start With Sweden. *The Washington Post*

Brooks ultimately wanted the team to be the underdogs and was not without reason for feeling this way, especially considering the embarrassing performance the team had against the Soviets; however, Craig sounded more optimistic about the team's chances in Lake Placid.

Brooks and Craig represent the dichotomy of the expectations for the U.S. team's chances in Lake Placid. Brooks, like many others, embraced the perception that the team was the underdog not just to the Soviets but to other teams such as Czechoslovakia and Sweden. Craig represented the optimistic outlook for the team going into the Olympics. He felt that the team had proven they could succeed against the best teams but would likely still have to orchestrate a miracle to defeat the Soviets. While few publicly were giving the Americans a chance to defeat the Soviets, many people still felt that the U.S. hockey team had a chance at success against the other teams in the 1980 Winter Olympics. The myth claims the team had no chance for any form of success, but reality tells a different story.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to the myth, the 1980 United States Olympic hockey team was not completely dismissed before the competition at Lake Placid, as its talent and achievements leading up to the Olympic Games clearly demonstrated their potential for success. The initial media coverage of the team did not express skepticism regarding the players' abilities, but rather inspired optimism about their potential. Specifically, the media believed that the team could achieve relative success against opponents other than the Soviet Union, as evidenced by the opinions of hockey players, executives, and media representatives, who all deemed it realistic for the team to succeed at the Lake Placid Winter Olympics. Additionally, some details regarding the team challenge their status within the myth as amateurs. Brooks constructed the roster using college-

aged players who were highly skilled and had professional aspirations, forcing U.S. hockey officials to compensate the players at a relatively high level to deter players from signing high-paying deals with NHL teams. These aspects of the team that storytellers downplay, or outright ignore, reveal that the Miracle on Ice has become a nationalistic story with mythological elements attached to it. The blurring or changing of details of the story reveals an effort, either conscious or unconscious, to slip the bonds of linear storytelling and embrace the telling of fragments of the story to create "a radically new relation among parts of a whole."<sup>76</sup> The myth works best when the public perceives the team as amateurs who were the underdogs, which resonates strongly with the American public. Thus, when elements of the story challenge the myth, storytellers suppress them, leading the populace to only remember details that affirm the myth. Therefore, the Miracle on Ice as it exists in the early 21st century is not a cohesive story but a narrative combining factual and counterfeit parts of a story to create a myth.

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<sup>76</sup> Corney, F. (2018). *Telling October: Memory and the making of the Bolshevik revolution* (p. 184). Cornell University Press.

## Chapter 2 - During the Olympics:

An analysis of primary sources, including news articles and memoirs, about the team's incredible journey during the Lake Placid Winter Olympics shows how the Miracle on Ice became a narrative filled with nationalistic and patriotic significance. The team's defining moment occurred when the Americans overcame the Soviet Union in the first medal-round game and then, two days later, clinched the gold medal with a victory against Finland. Americans began to identify with the young Olympic hockey players during this time, as the public perceived the players on the team as average Americans and, therefore, uniquely capable of representing the populace. They ultimately proved that one does not need to be exceptionally talented to succeed, which restored a sense of nationalistic pride. The players represented youthfulness and an unlikely victor for the public, which appealed to long-standing myths about the American collective identity. This evolution of the narrative reveals the beginning stages of the creation of a self-legitimizing myth.

### U.S. - Sweden (2/12/1980)

At the start of the Olympics, the U.S. team played with five defensemen rather than the typical six because Jack O'Callahan injured his knee in the U.S. 10-3 loss to the Soviets in their last exhibition game before the Olympics.<sup>77</sup> This situation further established the team as underdogs and put U.S. head coach Herb Brooks in a predicament. He could replace O'Callahan with another defenseman or keep him on the roster and risk playing a man down. According to John Powers of *The Boston Globe*, Brooks came close to cutting O'Callahan due to his injury and even contacted possible replacements such as Les Auge and Jack Hughes, who played for the

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<sup>77</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 12). U.S. Six starts quest for medal against Sweden. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

Olympic team during their pre-Olympic schedule.<sup>78</sup> O'Callahan said his coaches told him they had to "bring in somebody else" in the days leading up to their arrival in Lake Placid. Ultimately, Brooks decided the team was better off keeping O'Callahan, as they could not add him back to the roster later in the Olympics, even if he were healthy enough to play. The decision to retain O'Callahan was a gamble, as competing with one less player against one of their toughest opponents in the qualifying round heightened their chances of losing. O'Callahan was a vital piece of the team's defense core and losing him meant that the four remaining defensemen would play with little rest and no assistance until his return. If the team lost to Sweden, they would be a game behind in a competitive pool of teams, making qualifying for the medal round a more challenging task.

Jim Craig and Mark Johnson, two of the best American players throughout the pre-Olympic schedule, were also nursing injuries. The press built Craig up as the "savior of the U.S. team"<sup>79</sup> all season but his ankle injury required him to take cortisone shots to help remedy the pain. Craig's recent performances in the last few pre-Olympic games had been underwhelming, prompting John Gilbert, a sports columnist for the *Star Tribune*, to describe him as being in a "slump." In their final exhibition game against the Soviets, he allowed four goals in less than one period, which led Brooks to take him out of the game in favor of backup Steve Janaszak. Mark Johnson, the team's top scorer in their pre-Olympic slate of games, had recently missed three weeks of playing time while dealing with a deep thigh bruise. He claimed that his body was beginning to heal from the injury, but it would take time for him to build back his stamina to keep pace with their speedy international opponents. This cast some doubt on his

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<sup>78</sup> Powers, J. (1980, February 11). O'Callahan hurt - may be cut. *The Boston Globe*, 35.

<sup>79</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 12). U.S. Six starts quest for medal against Sweden. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

ability to play at a high level during these Olympics and created further opportunities for the development of the team's underdog status.

The three players—who were dealing with a combination of injury and poor performance—made it difficult to forecast the success the team would have in Lake Placid, and may have contributed significantly to the team's perception as underdogs. Successful U.S. Olympic hockey teams in 1960 and 1972 relied on sound goaltending from Jack McCartan and Mike Curran for the team's overall success. According to E.M. Swift of *Sports Illustrated*, Brooks believed Craig would need to emulate McCartan and Curran and have a superb performance for the team to achieve their lofty expectations.<sup>80</sup> For most of the pre-Olympic schedule, Jim Craig played effectively, but in the weeks leading up to the Olympics, he played uncharacteristically bad while also suffering from an ankle injury, giving speculators a reason to doubt the U.S. team's chances of succeeding. Mark Johnson's injury was perhaps the most potentially damning of these three situations. The U.S. team needed Johnson—maybe the team's overall best player—to play at a high level to have a chance for success in these Olympics. This injury situation and the team's recent loss to the Soviets in Madison Square Garden suggested that the team would likely struggle to win against Sweden, solidifying their status as underdogs.

Despite this, the U.S. team dramatically tied with Sweden on February 12th, 1980.<sup>81</sup> The group was down 2-1 with less than thirty seconds remaining in regulation when Brooks pulled Craig to have six offensive skaters on the ice to try to get the equalizing goal. Bill Baker gave Brooks that tying goal with just twenty-seven seconds remaining in the team's first-round game. While not a win, tying with Sweden motivated the U.S. team. Most in the international hockey community did not consider Sweden as good as Czechoslovakia or the Soviet Union, but they

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<sup>80</sup> Swift, E. (1980, February 25). The boys of Winter. *Sports Illustrated*, 26.

<sup>81</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 13). U.S. Ties Sweden in Olympic hockey. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

played a creative European style of hockey and featured talented players.<sup>82</sup> In tying with Sweden without O'Callahan and with two others playing through injuries, the young U.S. team gained optimism about their chances of succeeding for the rest of the Olympics. This tie gave the U.S. team a substantially easier route to qualifying for the medal round.

The round-robin tournament structure ascribed two points to a team for winning, one point for a tie, and zero points for a loss. In the case of a tie in record at the end of the qualifying round, Olympic officials utilized goal differential to decide the final standings. So, if the Americans lost outright to Sweden, it would be difficult to make up the points in their next games. Czechoslovakia, who most considered to be the second-best hockey team in the world and the only team with a chance at beating the Soviets, was the next opponent on the schedule for the Americans.<sup>83,84</sup> If the Americans had lost to Sweden and then lost to the Czechoslovak team, their odds of winning a medal would have gone down tremendously. The team's tie with Sweden proved crucial in keeping their aspirations for a medal alive.

The U.S. team's success was primarily due to solid play from Jim Craig. As Gerald Eskenazi explained in his article in *The New York Times* from February 14th, 1980, Craig represented the "anchor"<sup>85</sup> of the team. Herb Brooks described his play as "outstanding" and stated that Craig's performance against Sweden represented his best in weeks. Although Brooks mentioned Craig's struggles in the weeks leading up to the Olympics, he stated that Craig told him not to worry and that he would be ready when it counted. He was correct as Craig was an important factor to the team's tie with Sweden.

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<sup>82</sup> Gilbert, J. (2019). *Miracle in Lake Placid: the greatest hockey story ever told* (p. 52). Simon and Schuster.

<sup>83</sup> Michaels, A., & Wertheim, L. J. (2014). *You can't make this up: Miracles, memories, and the perfect marriage of sports and television*. Harper Collins.

<sup>84</sup> Coffey, W. R. (2005). *The boys of winter : the untold story of a coach, a dream, and the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team*, (p. 37). Thorndike Press.

<sup>85</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1980, February 14). Goalie Key to U.S. Fortunes; Russians Flex Muscles Straight From College Goalie Is Key to U.S. Hockey Fortunes Expects Early Pressure. *The New York Times*, 45, 48.

The U.S. team played Sweden in front of a small crowd of only about 3,000 people, less than half of the arena's capacity. John Gilbert speculated that the small attendance was due to reports that the game would be a sell out and a lack of shuttle service preventing fans from attending the game.<sup>86</sup> Brooks did describe the fans of the U.S. team who were in attendance as giving the U.S. Olympians a "big lift," providing a distinctive home-ice advantage for the team.

### **U.S. - Czechoslovakia (2/14/1980)**

The next team on the Olympic schedule was the talented Czechoslovaks. Surprisingly, the U.S. team beat Czechoslovakia by a final score of 7-3. John Gilbert described this American victory as "astounding"<sup>87</sup> to the hockey community and led the U.S. Olympic hockey team to become "THE story"<sup>88</sup> for the entire United States in the Winter Olympics. Buzzy Schneider, who scored two goals, led the U.S. team offensively. Mike Eruzione, Mark Pavelich, Mark Johnson, Phil Verchota, and Rob McClanahan also added goals. Jim Craig once again played well, only allowing the Czechoslovaks to score three goals. After the game against Sweden, he stated that if he could give up no more than three goals, "anything can happen."<sup>89</sup> The team surprised the hockey world by convincingly defeating a superior opponent, and, despite losing one of their best players, Mark Johnson, to a cheap shot, they proved that their chances for continued success were now on the rise.<sup>90</sup>

The victory over Czechoslovakia significantly increased team USA's odds of making the medal round. The public gave the young Olympic hockey players more attention, evidenced by

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<sup>86</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 13). U.S. Ties Sweden in Olympic hockey. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

<sup>87</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 15). U.S. stuns Czechs 7-3 in hockey. *Star Tribune*, 1D.

<sup>88</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 15). 'Coneheads' from the Range help check Czechs. *Star Tribune*, 1A.

<sup>89</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1980, February 14). Goalie key to U.S. fortunes; Russians flex muscles straight from college goalie is key to U.S. hockey fortunes expects early pressure. *The New York Times*, 48.

<sup>90</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1980, February 15). U.S. hockey team, in an upset, beats Czech Olympic squad, 7-3; U.S. six upsets Czechoslovakia incident sparks Americans crowd cheers them on. *The New York Times*, A26.

*The New York Times* referring to them as “television celebrities.”<sup>91</sup> Gilbert said the team should advance to the medal round since they had an advantage over Czechoslovakia in the divisional standings. Czechoslovakia and Sweden represented the two best teams out of America’s qualifying round opponents, meaning the competition would subside for the U.S. Olympians. They would play Norway, Romania, and West Germany—teams ranked below Sweden and Czechoslovakia—to round out their qualifying round schedule. Thus, the Americans should have had little to no trouble defeating these inferior opponents. After their victory over Czechoslovakia, it would require a “collapse” for the U.S. team to not qualify for the medal round.<sup>92</sup>

Herb Brooks relied heavily on his “Conehead line” during the team’s victory over Czechoslovakia. In hockey, a line refers to a group of three forwards who play simultaneously on the ice together. Typically, a hockey team has four lines, with the first line representing the best offensive players. The American team dubbed one of their lines the “Conehead line,”<sup>93</sup> inspired by a Saturday Night Live skit involving Dan Aykroyd, Jane Curtin, and Laraine Newman who played aliens attempting to blend in as humans. This line featured Mark Pavelich, Buzzy Schneider, and John Harrington, all from the Iron Range part of Minnesota. The players assumed this meant Brooks perceived them as being from “a world of their own” and thus were like aliens on the Saturday Night Live skit, hence the name Coneheads. According to Brooks, the players on the conehead line were “hot” and “set the tempo” for the U.S. team in their second game of the Olympics. Brooks further established this point by describing the line as the team’s first line against the Czechoslovaks.

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<sup>91</sup> (1980, February 16). U.S. hockey triumph is toast of Olympics; Norway is next foe early points count hockey upset toast of town not taken lightly. *The New York Times*, 15.

<sup>92</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 15). ‘Coneheads’ from the Range help check Czechs. *Star Tribune*, 1A.

<sup>93</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 15). ‘Coneheads’ from the Range help check Czechs. *Star Tribune*, 1A.

Captain Mike Eruzione and ABC hockey commentator Al Michaels described the team's victory over the Czechoslovaks as the greatest win for any U.S. team since 1960. Herb Brooks, perhaps hoping to keep his team grounded, said the victory was "very important" but that it would be unfair to say it was the greatest win since 1960.<sup>94</sup> Brooks argued this point by explaining that the U.S. Olympic hockey team won a Silver Medal in the 1972 Winter Olympics, thus claiming their victory over the Czechoslovaks as the most important was doing a disservice to their relatively successful team. While it may have been true that their victory over Czechoslovakia was the most important victory in two decades, Brooks likely did not want his team to become complacent, but instead, aspire for more than just a victory over Czechoslovakia.

Following the team's victory over the Czechoslovaks, Eskenazi described the race for the gold as being "truly on"<sup>95</sup> for America. Even though the U.S. team dominated Czechoslovakia, decades later the game against the Soviets drastically overshadows the public's memory of this qualifying round game. The myth is ultimately most potent when the U.S. played their socio-political and hockey rival, the Soviets, who had won every Olympic gold medal in hockey since the Americans won it in 1960. The foundation of the myth rests on the assertion that the public doubted the U.S. team's ability to defeat the Soviets, but sports journalists built on the team's pre-olympic success and pointed to the victory over Czechoslovakia as evidence that the U.S. had a shot at deposing the Soviets and winning a gold medal. Many players on the U.S. team had phenomenal performances against Czechoslovakia, and their confidence was understandably beginning to rise. Despite Brooks' best efforts to keep them humble, several players expressed a belief that more victories lay ahead.

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<sup>94</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 15). 'Coneheads' from the Range help check Czechs. *Star Tribune*, 12A.

<sup>95</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1980). *Victory for America: Miracle on Ice* (p. 20). Bantam Books.

## U.S. - Norway (2/16/1980)

In their pre-Olympic schedules, the U.S. and Norway Olympic hockey teams tied each other in September of 1979. Brooks' sense that the team played with little effort made him so mad that "he made them stay on the ice after the game and skate stops and starts for a half hour."<sup>96</sup> The U.S. team knew they could not afford another lackluster performance against Norway if they wanted to secure a spot in the medal round. Fortunately, Mark Johnson boosted the team's morale by playing against Norway, despite sustaining an injury when a Czechoslovak player hit him maliciously in the previous game. Johnson's return to the ice and the upcoming opponents for the U.S. team put them in a prime position to compete for a spot in the medal round. The U.S. team defeated Norway 5-1 leading "many Americans...to think about the still remote possibility of a gold medal," as expectations for the U.S. team were rising and aspirations for a gold medal existed well before the U.S. – Soviet Union game.<sup>97</sup>

After the game, Brooks explained, "we were coming off an emotional high, and we got a little selfish out there today,"<sup>98</sup> as a victory over Czechoslovakia perhaps left the Americans with a false sense of security and culminated in a sloppy first period of play. The Norwegians' defensively focused game plan "clogg[ed] up the American passing game," resulting in a 1-0 lead for Norway after one period of play. The U.S. team responded to a disappointing first period by scoring three unanswered goals by Mike Eruzione, Mark Johnson, and Dave Silk. The American players continued their strong play in the 3rd period, adding two more goals by Mark Wells and Ken Morrow. The U.S. dominated Norway, outshooting them by a clip of 43-22. The victory over Norway proved that their performance against Czechoslovakia was not the result of

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<sup>96</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 16). U.S. six not taking Norway lightly. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

<sup>97</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1980). *Victory for America: Miracle on Ice* (p. 29). Bantam Books.

<sup>98</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 17). U.S. hockey team whips Norway 5-1. *Star Tribune*, 8C.

dumb luck but due to the team's overall talent level which allowed them to compete against some of the best teams in the world.

Public interest in the young U.S. Olympic hockey team was on the rise. According to Eskenazi the outside of the arena for the U.S. – Norway game was as crowded as "a Sunday night at Madison Square Garden at playoff time"<sup>99</sup> despite an on going transit problem plaguing these Olympics.<sup>100</sup> Outside the arena many tried to scalp tickets to get into the arena to watch the young Olympians play. Well-known sports celebrities attended the U.S.-Norway game, including Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw and Olympic figure skater JoJo Starbuck, revealing the team's widening appeal.

After they won against Norway, Dave Anderson, a sports columnist for *The New York Times*, called the U.S. Olympic hockey team "America's team,"<sup>101</sup> comparing them to the Dallas Cowboys, who were often associated with a broad national appeal. Anderson observed that the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team attracted a growing audience of Americans who "thought until now a hockey puck was an insult in a Don Rickles monologue." He also felt the U.S. team possessed a unique quality that "often creates miracles," as they were "not expected to win." Although most saw the Soviets as the more formidable team, demonstrated by their recent pre-Olympic game at Madison Square Garden, Anderson pointed out that the American roster included immensely talented players, thirteen of whom NHL franchises had already drafted. While defeating the Soviets seemed a tall order, the U.S. team had already shown through their strong performances in earlier Olympic matches that they had the talent and potential to contend for a medal, perhaps even the gold.

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<sup>99</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1980, February 16). Norway absorbs 5-1 Loss. *The New York Times*, 1, 325, 237.

<sup>100</sup> Lopez, L. (1980, February 15). Olympic transit system bogs; Greyhound gets hasty SOS call. *The Kansas City Times*, D-2.

<sup>101</sup> Anderson, D. (1980, February 17). America's team plays its game on ice. *The New York Times*, 327.

## U.S. - Romania (2/18/1980)

In his pregame speech before the U.S. - Romania game, Brooks told his team they were in a great position to advance to the medal round. However, Brooks urged his players to understand the gravity of the situation and how disappointing it would be to blow this opportunity. He ensured his players that if they lost to Romania and jeopardized their chance at advancing to the medal round, they would carry the memory "to [their] graves."<sup>102</sup>

Advancing to the medal round required more than simply defeating Romania outright. Going into the match, the most likely scenario for the team was to end up tied with Sweden in the standings, meaning that goal differential would determine which team advanced. With Sweden five goals ahead in the table, the U.S. team needed not only to beat their opponents but to score as many goals as possible.<sup>103</sup> Brooks stated that he planned on giving Jim Craig the day off and allowing his backup goalie, Steve Janazack, to play against Romania; however, due to the goal differential rules, he needed to start Craig to ensure the team allowed the least number of goals possible.<sup>104</sup> The U.S. team, playing in front of an "enthusiastic" crowd, outshot Romania 51-21 en route to a 7-2 victory.<sup>105</sup>

The team also benefited from another "outstanding display of goaltending." Jim Craig had only allowed one even-strength goal in the last two games.<sup>106</sup> Eskenazi described Craig as American's "most efficient player thus far during the Olympics." The victory allowed the U.S. team to keep pace with Sweden in the standings. Sweden defeated Norway 7-1 and held a 4-goal

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<sup>102</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 18). U.S. 6 gets day off, meets Romania today. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

<sup>103</sup> Coughlin, D. (1980, February 18). Big score Olympic ice goal. *The Plain Dealer*, 1C.

<sup>104</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 18). U.S. 6 gets day off, meets Romania today. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

<sup>105</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 19). Team U.S.A tops Romania, stays unbeaten. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

<sup>106</sup> When both teams have all players available as opposed to a power play, when one team is forced to play with fewer players after committing a penalty.

advantage over the U.S. in goal differential, placing the Americans in second place within their division heading into the medal round.<sup>107</sup> With only one game remaining in the qualifying round, the U.S. team secured their spot in the medal round but could create a more efficient route to the gold by finishing ahead of Sweden, thereby allowing them to play the Soviets in the final game of the medal round instead of the first.

### **U.S. - West Germany (2/20/1980)**

The U.S. team's last qualifying-round opponent, West Germany, had proven to be a thorn in the side of the Americans, costing them a bronze medal in the 1976 Winter Olympics in Innsbruck and beating them twice in the 1979 World Hockey Championship tournament.<sup>108</sup> According to Mark Pavelich, the best way to avoid another disappointing performance against West Germany would be to secure an early lead in the game.<sup>109</sup> This quick start would transfer the pressure from the U.S. team to West Germany.

The U.S. team did not achieve the quick start Pavelich desired in their game against West Germany. The West Germans initially outperformed the Americans, establishing a two-goal lead by the end of the first period.<sup>110</sup> To surpass Sweden in the standings, the U.S. team needed to secure a 7-goal lead. Despite a strong performance from Rob McClanahan, who scored two goals, and Dave Christian, who assisted on three goals, the team managed a 4-2 victory over West Germany. With this win, the U.S. team finished five goals behind Sweden in goal differential, placing them as the second seed in their division.

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<sup>107</sup> Powers, J. (1980, February 19). US romps, 7-2; is it enough? *The Boston Globe*, 29.

<sup>108</sup> Powers, J. (1980, February 21). US triumphs, 4-2; medal round next. *The Boston Globe*, 39.

<sup>109</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 20). Pavelich is ace at ducking and dodging. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

<sup>110</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1980, February 21). U.S. sextet defeats West Germany, 4-2; Final round next. *The New York Times*, D19.

The next team on their Olympic schedule was the Soviet Union, the same squad that beat them 10-3 in their last exhibition game. While it was unlikely that the team could beat the Soviets, a victory against Finland in their second game, would guarantee them a bronze medal. According to Herb Brooks, winning the bronze medal in the 1980 Olympics would be like “[winning] a gold medal in 1960.”<sup>111</sup> His expectation for the team was to win a bronze or silver medal, meaning that he still thought a victory over the Soviets would truly be a remarkable accomplishment. Nevertheless, the expectation for the underdog U.S. squad had shifted away from disappointment towards a minimum expectation to walk away with bronze as they entered the medal rounds.

#### **U.S. - Soviet Union (2/22/1980)**

The U.S. team went into the game against the Soviets with a limited number of press members and fans giving them a realistic chance of defeating their opposition, as most people, aside from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), recognized that the Soviet players were not amateurs but rather professional athletes.<sup>112</sup> Thus, the U.S. team had “no chance of winning, on paper.” Few in the press believed in the possibility of an American victory, fueling a history-long belief in American tenacity. The game presented another chance for success, even as the underdog, tapping into a deep-rooted aspect of American mythology dating back to the nation's beginnings. Their narrative closely mirrors that of a legendary figure from the American Revolution—Alexander Hamilton. Much like Hamilton, this team is ultimately remembered for

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<sup>111</sup> Stogel, C. (1980, February 10). Soviets bury Americans. *The Journal News*, 2D.

<sup>112</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 22). U.S. - Soviet game transcends gold medal. *Star Tribune*, 1D.

rising to prominence through their "wit and skill," overcoming significant challenges along the way.<sup>113</sup>

Many Americans understood this was an opportunity to witness something transcending a sporting event, so ticket prices for the game skyrocketed. The face value for a ticket was \$67.20; however, according to broadcaster Al Michaels, tickets were being exchanged outside the arena for three times that price and Mark Johnson said after the game that he "heard of one lady who offered \$600" for a ticket.<sup>114</sup> The hefty investment many Americans were willing to make to watch the team play reveals that for many Americans, this game carried cultural and social implications—as their opponent being the Soviets likely played a role in the difficulty to find a ticket. Brooks believed these implications could overwhelm his young team and be detrimental to their success. Thus, Brooks stated, "we will not attach any political significance to the game against the Russians." He believed that while the two countries may hate each other, his team needed to forget their political rivalry while they were on the ice. Brooks' message might have resonated with his players and enabled them to remain focused, but he could not stop the American public from viewing this game as a patriotic opportunity to display their disdain towards the USSR.

Soviet coach Victor Tikhonov stated that his biggest problem throughout these Olympics was motivating his players.<sup>115</sup> In the qualifying round, Finland and Canada played aggressively against the Soviets and took the USSR team to the brink of defeat. Scotty Bowman, coach and general manager of the Buffalo Sabres, said he would give the U.S. a chance to win solely on emotion, meaning the Americans played hockey with a distinct emotional element relative to the

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<sup>113</sup> Robertson, J. O. (1980). *American myth, American reality* (1st ed., p. 64). Hill & Wang.

<sup>114</sup> Swift, E. (1980, March 3). The golden goal. *Sports Illustrated*, 16-20.

<sup>115</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 22). U.S. - Soviet game transcends gold medal. *Star Tribune*, 1D.

Soviets unexpressive and machinelike brand of hockey. The Soviets were also down a key player due to injury as Alexander Maltsev, who scored twice in the exhibition game in Madison Square Garden, was not expected to play in the medal round. Clare Drake, coach of the Canadian Olympic hockey team, said, "If I were a betting man, I would bet the Americans will [win], right here."<sup>116</sup> The limited press coverage highlighting the vulnerabilities of the Soviets reveals the U.S. did have a legitimate chance to win the game, challenging one of the core elements of the myth--that the team was a hopeless underdog with virtually no chance at defeating the superior Soviet hockey team.

The U.S. - Soviet game marked the climax of the 1980 U.S. team's popularity during the Winter Olympics. Because of the U.S. team's rising popularity, in the days leading up to the game ABC sought to broadcast the game between the U.S. and the Soviet Union before a national audience, with network executives anticipating an audience "larger than for the Super Bowl."<sup>117</sup> This contest was one of the most pivotal moments in the creation of the myth because, to many Americans, this was "more than a hockey game"<sup>118, 119</sup> with journalist Joe Hart describing it as a "match made in heaven."<sup>120</sup> This game was unlike the majority of popular sporting matches, as it featured not just two opposing teams but two opposing nations in the midst of a decades-long ideological Cold War. According to Joe Soucheray of *The Star Tribune*, the U.S. Olympic hockey team was about to engage in "perhaps the most significant political confrontation of the year."<sup>121</sup> While the U.S. hockey team was playing well enough to attract a

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<sup>116</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 22). U.S. - Soviet game transcends gold medal. *Star Tribune*, 3D.

<sup>117</sup> Soucheray, J. (1980, February 22). Lake Placid, NY. *Star Tribune*, 3D.

<sup>118</sup> Soucheray, J. (1980, February 22). Lake Placid, NY. *Star Tribune*, 3D.

<sup>119</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 22). U.S. - Soviet game transcends gold medal. *Star Tribune*, 1D.

<sup>120</sup> Hart, J. (1980, February 21). Hockey showdown Friday between U.S. and Russia. *The Capital Times*, 13.

<sup>121</sup> Soucheray, J. (1980, February 22). Lake Placid, NY. *Star Tribune*, 3D.

large crowd based on skill alone, most Americans were more concerned with the global implications of potentially beating the Soviets.

In the lead up to the game, a plethora of dramatic comments in newspapers reveal the magnitude of the value the public ascribed to this game, laying foundation for a U.S. hockey victory to become a revered piece of American mythology. For example, according to John Gilbert, people believed that if the U.S. team defeated the Soviets, America would win the Cold War and force the USSR to withdraw from Afghanistan.<sup>122</sup> Another article in *The Star Tribune* stated that when the U.S. and the Soviets faced off, they would be competing for "the bragging rights for the planet."

The U.S. hockey team defeated the best hockey club in the world and the same team that "embarrassed the NHL all-stars"<sup>123</sup> a year earlier—the Soviet Union—by a final score of 4-3.<sup>124</sup> Mark Johnson led the way for the Americans, scoring two goals. Johnson's first goal came with less than a second remaining in the first period, which led Tikhonov to pull goalie Vladislav Tretiak, widely believed to be the best goalie on the planet, allowing backup Vladimir Myshkin to play the final two periods. Buzzy Schneider scored the first goal for the U.S. team, while Captain Mike Eruzione scored the final and game-sealing goal, which brought many Americans "to the edge of their seats" and sent repercussions "rinkwide, nationwide, [and] worldwide." The team also benefited from another superb display of goaltending from Jim Craig, who made a remarkable 39 saves.<sup>125</sup> The U.S. victory marked the the Soviets' first hockey loss in the Winter Olympics in over 12 years.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 22). U.S. - Soviet game transcends gold medal. *Star Tribune*, 1D.

<sup>123</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1980, February 23). U.S. defeats Soviet squad in Olympic hockey by 4-3. *The New York Times*, 16.

<sup>124</sup> Soucheray, J. (1980, February 23). It was U-S-A day on the Olympic ice. *Star Tribune*, 1A.

<sup>125</sup> (1980, February 23). US upsets Soviets in hockey, 4-3. *The Boston Globe*, 1.

<sup>126</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 23). Lake Placid bears witness to a night full of emotion. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

The Soviets could have avoided the significant loss by adhering to conventional hockey strategy, which suggests that if your team is trailing with less than a minute left, it makes sense to play without a goalie. This strategic approach allows for an extra skater on the ice, thus providing a greater opportunity to score the tying goal and prevent the team from outright losing the game. The Soviets, unfamiliar to playing from a deficit because of years of utter dominance, failed to remove their goalie as time ticked down. The U.S. team, on the other hand, typically played their opposition closely and trailed in every game of the Olympics; therefore, they were much more familiar with the competitive advantage associated with pulling the goalie when trailing with little time remaining in the game. The team specifically utilized this approach in their first game of the Olympics against Sweden, as the team pulled goalie Jim Craig in the last minute of the game, allowing defensemen Bill Baker to score the tying goal with just twenty-seven seconds remaining. Ironically, the Soviets pummeling their opponents for nearly two decades proved costly to their chances of winning against the Americans in the Lake Placid Winter Olympics.

Following the game's conclusion, fireworks burst in the air, and strangers hugged each other in the streets. A sister of one of the U.S. players said after the game, "she hadn't seen so many flags since the '60s, and we were burning them then."<sup>127</sup>

U.S. President Jimmy Carter called Herb Brooks following the game's conclusion to express his gratitude for the U.S. team's success and to personally invite them to the White House on Monday to share "a couple cases of Cokes."<sup>128</sup> President Carter's support reveals the legitimate institutional credibility the team gained in the wake of their game against the Soviets. Vice President Walter Mondale, a resident of Minnesota (the home of most of the U.S. Olympic

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<sup>127</sup> Swift, E. (1980, March 3). The golden goal. *Sports Illustrated*, 18.

<sup>128</sup> Soucheray, J. (1980, February 23). It was U-S-A day on the Olympic ice. *Star Tribune*, 8A.

hockey players and head coach Herb Brooks), was to be in attendance for their final game against Finland.<sup>129</sup> The U.S. team's victory over the Soviet Union strongly affected Mondale, who wanted to see them play live. He told coach Herb Brooks that the team's success over the Soviets showed that "we don't have to prove our way of life is better through state-run sports, we can do it through amateur bodies."<sup>130</sup>

For many, the game's result reflected American exceptionalism, a belief that, according to Michael Ruth asserts that "the United States is unique among all other nations" in its devotion to its guiding principles.<sup>131</sup> In this interpretation, the win proved that the Western ideas of freedom and capitalism trumped the exploitative socialist Soviet experiment. E.M. Swift of *Sports Illustrated* stated that the young American hockey players succeeded through using an "old-fashioned American work ethic" revealing an appeal to traditional American myths, specifically regarding the ideal of the American dream.<sup>132</sup> The team uniquely fits these myths because people perceived them as less talented relative to the Soviets due to their status as amateurs; however, they succeeded against the Soviets because they had the traditional American trait of perseverance. The success of the team reinforced the American dream—that anyone, despite their talent level or pedigree, who comes to the United States with a strong work ethic can achieve miraculous levels of success.

Eric Heiden, an Olympic speed skater who was the story of the 1980 Winter Olympics before the U.S. hockey team stole the show, stated that the U.S. victory over the Soviets was "the greatest accomplishment I've ever seen in sports."<sup>133</sup> This was significant for Heiden to say, as he

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<sup>129</sup> Soucheray, J. (1980, February 25). Mondale grew hoarse with joy. *Star Tribune*, 3C.

<sup>130</sup> Anderson, D. (1980, February 25). 'Big Doolies' of the world. *The New York Times*, C1, C4.

<sup>131</sup> Ruth, M. (2023). American exceptionalism. *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.

<sup>132</sup> Swift, E. (1980, December 22). A reminder of what we can be. *Sports Illustrated*, 30.

<sup>133</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 24). U.S. 6 will have to prove mettle against Finns. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

won five individual gold medals while competing during the Lake Placid Winter Olympics. Thomas Boswell, columnist for the *Washington Post*, stated that some in attendance for the U.S. - Soviet game described it as "the most stirring athletic event of their lifetimes."<sup>134</sup> He felt that the game shared more similarities with a military operation than a sporting game and described it as "[duplicating], in miniature, many of the emotions and motivations that have fed the fires of every war in history." Boswell's remarks further illustrate that Americans viewed the victory over the Soviets as a significant achievement that went beyond sports.

### **U.S. - Finland (2/24/1980)**

The U.S. team's thrilling victory over the Soviets had the Americans in prime position to win the gold medal; however, the team could potentially still finish in 4th without a medal, if they lost their final game against Finland.<sup>135</sup> The team could win the gold if they lost; however, it would be easiest for them to defeat Finland and avoid any unnecessary tie-breaking scenarios, depending on the result of the Sweden - Soviet Union game. The overall talent level of Finland combined with the lofty implications now attached to this game as a result of their victory over the Soviets all made this game an extremely consequential match for the team. Jim Craig was one player feeling the increased pressure for their upcoming game, as he stated it represented the first time they played with "something to lose."<sup>136</sup> Craig felt there was more at stake with this game than against the Soviets and, according to him, Finland was "just as good as the Russians" all revealing that the Americans expected this game to be very challenging.

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<sup>134</sup> Boswell, T. (1980, February 24). Bittersweet memories of Lake Placid will endure. *The Washington Post*.

<sup>135</sup> (1980, February 24). Recognition comes at last for U.S. six. *The New York Times*, 4.

<sup>136</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 24). U.S. 6 will have to prove mettle against Finns. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

The Olympic officials scheduled the game for Sunday morning at 11 a.m. EST (or 8 a.m. PST). This early start potentially jeopardized the enthusiastic nationwide response to the team by threatening to significantly impact viewership since the game was not played in primetime. To make matters worse, the U.S. team once again got off to a slow start against Finland and trailed by a goal in the final period, leading some American fans within the approximately 8,500 people<sup>137</sup> sold-out crowd to boo the players for their disappointing performance thus far.<sup>138</sup> This shift in attitude towards the U.S. team days after what many would remember as one of the greatest sporting moments ever revealed that the team's support fluctuated following the Soviet victory as a result of poor play in the first two periods of the Finland game. However, as the minutes ticked away in the final game of the 1980 Olympics, the American's boos transformed into celebration. The unlikely American underdogs prevailed as Phil Verchota, Rob McClanahan, and Mark Johnson all scored goals in the final period to win the gold medal, setting the foundation for a nationalistic myth. Al Michaels said on the broadcast, "this impossible dream [had come] true."<sup>139</sup> The U.S. team captured the thoughts and imaginations of many Americans by defeating the Soviet Union, but they captured the gold medal by beating Finland--cementing their place in American sporting lore.

The mythological implications attached to the team's success was not limited to the American public, but also included the players on the U.S. team. In a heavily attended press conference following the Finland game, Jack O'Callahan, a native of Charlestown, Massachusetts stated that he grew up near Bunker Hill and that the Americans won at Bunker

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<sup>137</sup> (1980, February 25). U.S.A 4, Finland 2. *Hartford Courant*, 28.

<sup>138</sup> Eskenazi, G. (1980, February 25). U.S. hockey squad captures gold medal. *The New York Times*, C4.

<sup>139</sup> Winner, B. (1980, February 25). ABC scores high grade on the ice. *Associated Press*, C2.

Hill, and now they had won at Lake Placid.<sup>140</sup> The press members were quick to point out that the Americans did not win at Bunker Hill; however, O’Callahan’s comments reveal the beginning of a self-legitimizing myth as it revealed that Lake Placid had become a lieu de mémoire, or a place of memory with mythological implications attached to it.<sup>141</sup>

The parallels O’Callahan attempted to draw between Bunker Hill, a military site that looms large in the popular memory of the American revolution, and Lake Placid reveals the immensity of the myth of the Miracle on Ice. Similar to how the Americans, according to O’Callahan, achieved an unlikely victory against a dominant force at Bunker Hill—the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team also achieved a tremendous victory. The patriots who fought at Bunker Hill and the hockey players who won in Lake Placid each share a place within key pieces of American mythology, as both provide the public with a model to emulate in terms of what it means to be a citizen of the United States. The public’s perception of the players as helpless underdogs reflects a shared sentiment with the farmers and laborers who fought in the Revolutionary War, drawing on a traditional American mythos that has been part of the nation’s story since its founding.

The U.S. team had gained an extensive following in just weeks of playing in Lake Placid. Several renowned Americans were in attendance for the U.S. - Finland game including star NFL quarterback Terry Bradshaw, Vice President Walter Mondale, and President Jimmy Carter’s daughter, Amy Carter. While not in attendance, President Carter said he watched the game with one eye "and Iran and the economy with the other."<sup>142</sup> President Carter stated that he and members of his administration were trying to do business and that nobody could do it because of

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<sup>140</sup> Powers, J. (1980, February 25). U.S. wears the flag and crown: Hockey team wins game, gold - and revels in the glory. *Boston Globe*, 37.

<sup>141</sup> Nora, P. (1984). *Les Lieux de mémoire*. Gallimard.

<sup>142</sup> Associated Press. (1980, February 25). The President is calling.... *Boston Globe*, 38.

the distraction that was the U.S. Olympic hockey team. President Carter's comments reflect an early attempt by an American politician to tap into the cultural significance of the 1980 U.S. hockey team, to boost his reelection chances and further his political agenda. While Carter is the first political leader to share this narrative, he would not be the last president to use the legacy of the Miracle for political purposes.

### **Initial response to the U.S. Olympic hockey team**

According to coach Herb Brooks, the U.S. team had "startled the athletic world, not [just] the hockey world."<sup>143</sup> Brooks's comments, however, fail to identify the full scope of an American victory that excited members of the populace that had no prior interest in sports. On the day of the team's gold medal win over Finland a musical production of the fairy tale Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was underway in front of a capacity crowd of 6,000 people at the Radio City Music Hall. A man named Mr. Bridges let the audience know that the U.S. team had just defeated Finland and the gold medal was America's. The music hall spokesman, Patricia Roberts, said, "The place just erupted," and responded by singing the Star-Spangled Banner.<sup>144</sup> The announcement brought the New York City crowd two or three minutes of absolute joy. Mrs. Roberts stated afterwards, "I guess [this story of the U.S. Olympic hockey team] is sort of a fairy story too," thus revealing the magical implications of the team's underdog story due to their unlikely success.

In the town of Winthrop, Massachusetts, home of Captain Mike Eruzione, people erupted as a motorcade of several dozen cars made their way through the streets waving American flags

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<sup>143</sup> Shapiro, L. (1980, February 25). 'Team of Destiny' wins hockey gold, 4-2. *The Washington Post*, D1.

<sup>144</sup> Clendinen, D. (1980, February 25). U.S. hockey victory stirs national celebration. *The New York Times*, C1, C4.

and shouting, "We're number 1!"<sup>145</sup> The wife of Massachusetts Governor Edward King, also a resident of Winthrop, called Eruzione's sister to voice her congratulations. At an NBA game in Kansas City, Missouri, a crowd of 14,546 people interrupted the game to sing the national anthem a second time to celebrate the U.S. Olympic hockey players. In Memphis, Tennessee, the local ABC affiliate broadcasted a church service rather than the game, disappointing several residents and sparking a protest of nearly a dozen people outside the station. A man who owned a helicopter was so angry that he flew over the city with a banner saying, "W.H.B.Q.- what happened to our hockey game?" In Athens, Ohio, a high school basketball game was underway when the announcer told everyone that the U.S. team defeated the Soviets.<sup>146</sup> The crowd responded joyfully, excitedly standing, yelling, and waving dozens of miniature American flags. In Miami, FL, doctors and nurses brought a T.V. into the surgical intensive care unit and watched the U.S. hockey team in between treating patients. In Atlanta, GA, Leo Mulder, manager of the Off Peachtree restaurant, came up with a special drink named in honor of Jim Craig. He called the drink the "Craig Cocktail." The Atlanta Flames drafted Craig before the Olympics began; thus, the city shared some excitement over their new star goaltender.

The raucous nationwide celebrations in response to the U.S. team reveal that the team's success throughout the Winter Olympics had come to represent more than just a sporting accomplishment for many Americans. The two decades before 1980 were full of political assassinations, international embarrassment over discrimination and violence towards minorities, and rising inflation. The culmination of two decades of chaos resulted in many Americans feeling a sense of malaise and anxiety about the future. However, the successful U.S. Olympic hockey team restored pride in American ideals and personified the theory of American

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<sup>145</sup> Clendinen, D. (1980, February 25). U.S. hockey victory stirs national celebration. *The New York Times*, C4.

<sup>146</sup> Swift, E. (1980, March 3). The golden goal. *Sports Illustrated*, 16-20.

exceptionalism. For many, President Reagan's belief that the nation had finally restored its place as "a shining city on a hill" characterized the 1980s, and the Miracle on Ice commenced this decade of nationalistic pride.

## **Conclusion**

The primary sources from the 1980 Winter Olympics reveal how the narrative surrounding the Miracle on Ice developed nationalistic and patriotic overtones, resulting in the team's appeal to all Americans—not just those with an already established interest in hockey. America witnessed a unique spectacle where amateur athletes were victorious against international superstars, which ultimately allowed the public to resonate with the American players. The team's appeal to the everyday American allowed the victory at Lake Placid to develop into a story of mythological proportions. The story's implications resulted in players sharing traits similar to those of traditional mythological heroes, as their experience in Lake Placid mirrors the story arc of classical heroes. The massive celebrations that broke out across the country following the American victories over the Soviet Union and Finland are a testament to the game's impact on many Americans. The team's success in Lake Placid ultimately laid the foundation for the creation of a self-legitimizing myth that continues to develop in the present.

### Chapter 3 - After the Olympics

In the years following the 1980 Olympic games in Lake Placid, the myth of the Miracle on Ice has developed through various moments of collective remembrance of the team's accomplishments. Several noteworthy American platforms, ranging from the political sphere to Hollywood, have created these moments of remembrance often corresponding with an effort to attach the team to their agendas, revealing how widespread and relevant the myth's appeal is for the public. Presently, the story's scope transcends that of a traditional sporting event and instead represents a frequently evoked mythological display of American exceptionalism used by many as a means of accomplishing their varying agendas.

#### **The continuation of the myth**

The legacy of the Miracle on Ice reflects a tendency within mythological stories for the team to experience a sense of confusion about the events that occurred, resulting in storytellers picking and choosing fragments of the story that best fit their interests.<sup>147</sup> Bill Baker, a defenseman for the 1980 U.S. hockey team, stated in an interview with John Gilbert decades after the Miracle on Ice that what happened in Lake Placid was "like a blur" for everyone involved.<sup>148</sup> Thus, when the players are together, finding a consensus on what happened is difficult, as several players remember things differently. A clear example of this inconsistency is certain players remembering a powerful Herb Brooks speech but being unable to decide definitively when he delivered it. Mike Eruzione and broadcaster Al Michaels claim Brooks told

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<sup>147</sup> Corney, F. (2018). *Telling october: Memory and the making of the Bolshevik revolution* (p. 184). Cornell University Press.

<sup>148</sup> Gilbert, J. (2019). *Miracle in Lake Placid: The greatest hockey story ever told*. Simon and Schuster.

the team that if they lost to Finland, they would take it to their "grave."<sup>149</sup> The only problem is that Brooks' comments about taking the loss to their graves did not come before the gold medal game against Finland but in a qualifying round game against Romania.<sup>150</sup> The story naturally seems to fit best when Brooks told them this after their miraculous victory over the Soviets rather than after a game against a lesser opponent. It would be disappointing for the team to lose to Romania after a successful initial stretch of games in the qualifying round, but it would be more catastrophic and utterly anticlimatic if the team lost to Finland and failed to earn the gold medal after their upset of the USSR.

The inaccuracies within the memories of Michaels and Eruzione may not diminish the legacy of the 1980 team. However, it reveals a correlation between the Miracle on Ice and other pieces of nationalistic mythology. In *Telling October*, Frederick Corney discusses how remembering slipped the bonds of linear storytelling in the years after the October Revolution.<sup>151</sup> Instead, fragments of stories created "a radically new relation among parts of a whole."<sup>152</sup> As the 20th century progressed, those who remembered the October Revolution altered the details of what happened consciously or unconsciously to ensure the myth remained as potent as possible for the Soviet populace. At first glance, it is difficult to see how anyone can find similarities between an Olympic hockey game and a revolution that took place a lifetime earlier on the other side of the world; however, the collective memory of both events for the public moved away from a chronological story in favor of a narrative supporting the myth. Within the Miracle on Ice and the October Revolution, the myth ultimately dictated the memory of the event.

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<sup>149</sup> Michaels, A., & Wertheim, L. J. (2014). *You can't make this up: Miracles, memories, and the perfect marriage of sports and television*. Harper Collins.

<sup>150</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 19). Team U.S.A tops Romania, stays unbeaten. *Star Tribune*, 1C.

<sup>151</sup> The October Revolution was a military coup in Petrograd (present-day Saint Petersburg) that resulted in the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, taking power by toppling the provisional government and thus ushering in the beginning of the Soviet Union.

<sup>152</sup> Corney, F. (2018). *Telling October: Memory and the making of the Bolshevik revolution*. Cornell University Press.

The power of the myth underlying the Miracle on Ice was so potent that it pushed the story of the young U.S. hockey team and broadcaster Al Michaels into stardom. In the years following Lake Placid, Michaels became one of the most accomplished sports broadcasters ever, calling eleven Super Bowls and becoming the only caster to call the Super Bowl, World Series, NBA Finals, and the Stanley Cup.<sup>153</sup> Despite the many great sporting events Michaels attended, he claims that the winning goal by Mike Eruzione to clinch victory over the Soviets was most incredible feat of skill. Sports Illustrated affirms Michaels' belief in the unprecedented impact of the team's victory by declaring it the greatest sporting moment of the 20th century<sup>154</sup> beating out such significant events as Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball,<sup>155</sup> Babe Ruth calling his home run against the Cubs in the 1932 World Series, and Jesse Owens winning 4 Gold medals in the face of the white supremacist Nazi Regime.<sup>156</sup> The Miracle created a never-to-be-duplicated celebration that Michaels believes, in a way, "has never stopped," continuing to live in the hearts and minds of many Americans and becoming a means of expressing American exceptionalism.

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<sup>153</sup> Eruzione, M., & Boudette, N. E. (2020). *The making of a miracle : the untold story of the captain of the 1980 gold medal-winning US Olympic hockey team* (1st ed., p. x - forward). Harper, an imprint of HarperCollings Publishers.

<sup>154</sup> Eruzione, M., & Boudette, N. E. (2020). *The making of a miracle : the untold story of the captain of the 1980 gold medal-winning US Olympic hockey team* (1st ed. pp. 241-242). Harper, an imprint of HarperCollings Publishers.

Baggot, A. (1999, December 5). Another magic moment for former UW skater Johnson. *Wisconsin State Journal*, 13D.

<sup>155</sup> Finkelman, P. (2024). Jackie Robinson. In P. Finkelman (ed.), *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*. Salem Press.

<sup>156</sup> (2013, March 2). *100 greatest moments*. Sports Illustrated. Retrieved from <https://www.si.com/100-greatest-moments>

## 1980 U.S. team involvement in the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics

In the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, the narrative surrounding the Miracle on Ice grew, as the memory of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team played a vital role in generating interest in these Olympics – the first held on American soil since the 1980 games in Lake Placid.

U.S. Olympic officials specifically utilized the team from a marketing perspective, as the players from the team joined the likes of Muhammad Ali, who won a gold medal in boxing while competing under the name Cassius Clay during the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome,<sup>157</sup> and Rafer Johnson, who also won the gold medal in decathlon during the 1960 olympics,<sup>158</sup> as the few American athletes to light the Olympic cauldron on U.S. soil.<sup>159</sup> Head coach Herb Brooks and assistant coach Craig Patrick also returned to lead the U.S. Olympic hockey team through another Winter Olympics. The team lighting the torch, the return of Brooks and Patrick, and the country facing another time of crisis following the 9/11 terrorist attacks set the stage for a compelling moment of mass remembrance of the Miracle on Ice.

The return of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team garnered significant interest in newspapers across the nation as journalists retold the story of the Miracle on Ice for their readers. In *The Atlanta Constitution*, sports columnist Guy Curtright explained the bedlam after the team's shocking victory over the Soviet Union. He believed the Miracle on Ice created a moment that "sticks in your mind" because of the victory's unlikely nature.<sup>160</sup> In the wake of the victory, the country "rediscovered its national pride thanks to a bunch of hardworking college kids who stunned the world by beating the mighty Soviet Union." Curtright's claims reveal the further

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<sup>157</sup> (1960, September 6). 178-Pound crown is taken by Clay; McClure wins in 156 class and crook in 165 before 16,000 at Rome games. *The New York Times*, 45.

<sup>158</sup> Danzing, A. (1960, September 7). Decathlon taken by Rafer Johnson; American first by 58 Points -- Elliott Captures 1,500 -- Davis Wins 400-Meter. *The New York Times*, 50.

<sup>159</sup> a symbolic gesture effectively beginning the Winter Games

<sup>160</sup> Curtright, G. (2002, February 10). 1980's team of dreamers: Torch lighting reunites gold-medal squad. *The Atlanta Constitution*, D11.

development of the self-legitimizing myth of the Miracle on Ice. In his article, he preserves the myth by describing the team's players as amateurs and underdogs and reminding his readers of the might of their Soviet opponent.

In *The Kansas City Star*, commentator Joe Posnanski compared captain Mike Eruzione to the *Star Wars* character Luke Skywalker, two popular heroes from the early 80s who, in 2002, were seemingly unaffected by the passage of time.<sup>161</sup> This shared phenomenon revealed that the story of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team shared similarities with pieces of fantasy fiction for many Americans. According to JRR Tolkien, fantasy fiction continues to resonate with people in the West despite the movement towards an embracement of empiricism.<sup>162, 163</sup> Tolkien believed that "there are indelible, deep longings in the human heart that realistic fiction cannot satisfy." Posnanski's comparison to Luke Skywalker reveals that Eruzione fits one of Tolkien's pillars of fantasy -- existing "outside of time altogether."<sup>164</sup> The fantastical nature of the players led to the Miracle on Ice itself becoming fantasy, and therefore, the memory of the game became one step closer to mythological status for many Americans.

To link the two Winter Olympics further, press members highlighted the national anxiety the country felt both in 1980 and in 2002, as the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics occurred in the wake of the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history on September 11, 2001.<sup>165</sup> American Olympic officials explicitly highlighted the tragedy of the 9/11 terrorist attacks during the opening

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<sup>161</sup> Posnanski, J. (2002, February 9). Seeing Eruzione returns us to Miracle on Ice. *The Kansas City Star*, D1, D7.

<sup>162</sup> Keller, T. (2015). *Preaching: Communicating faith in an age of skepticism* (pp. 174-176). Penguin. In this book, Timothy Keller summarizes JRR Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories".

<sup>163</sup> Book sales reveal Tolkien's claim to be correct, as fantasy books generate an average of \$590.2 million in sales each year in the United States. The genre has grown particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, as fantasy book sales increased by 45.3% in 2021 compared to 2020:

Curcic, D. (2022, October 2). *Science Fiction Book Sales Statistics [2023]*. Wordsrated. Retrieved March 27, 2024, from <https://wordrated.com/science-fiction-book-sales-statistics/>

<sup>164</sup> Keller, T. (2015). *Preaching: Communicating faith in an age of skepticism* (pp. 174-176). Penguin.

<sup>165</sup> Curtright, G. (2002, February 10). 1980's team of dreamers: Torch lighting reunites gold-medal squad. *The Atlanta Constitution*, D11.

ceremonies for the 2002 Winter Olympics. New York City police officers and firefighters joined the U.S. Olympic athletes, serving as honor guards, and New York City police officer Daniel Rodriguez sang “God Bless America” before the ceremony started.<sup>166</sup> The ceremony officially began with the torn flag from the World Trade Center carried into the arena, leaving the audience somberly silent.<sup>167</sup>

In the symbolic and pragmatic backdrop of 9/11, the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team once again, 22 years later, evoked a belief in American exceptionalism during a time mainly marked by tragedy and anxiety. American officials' decision to allow the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team to light the cauldron corresponded with an ideal opportunity for the country to remember the myth of the Miracle on Ice. It symbolized a recent American triumph in the face of adversity, effectively utilizing a salient cultural moment to “lift” the nation up again.<sup>168</sup> This mass remembrance of the Miracle on Ice allowed the team's legacy to reach a new generation, further solidifying the team's story as a piece of national mythology.

In the 22 years following the gold medal-winning campaign in Lake Placid, the U.S. Olympic hockey team had yet to win another medal in the Winter Olympics. Like in 1980, the U.S. hockey team was in a weak state in 2002. In the previous Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan, the team included professional players from the NHL for the first time in Olympic history, but finished in 6th place. While the 1980 team appealed to many Americans through their perceived status as blue-collar, working-class Americans, the 1998 team alienated themselves from the public due to their professional status and their delinquency, including reportedly trashing a hotel room hours after their elimination by the Czech Republic.<sup>169</sup> U.S. hockey

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<sup>166</sup> Arrillaga, P. (2002, February 8). U.S. summons 'Miracle on Ice' to open games. *The Associated Press*.

<sup>167</sup> Arrillaga, P. (2002, February 10). Olympic ideals: Miracle guys perfect. *Portland Press Herald*, 13D.

<sup>168</sup> Arrillaga, P. (2002, February 8). U.S. summons 'Miracle on Ice' to open games. *The Associated Press*.

<sup>169</sup> Alexander, R. (1998, February 20). U.S. hockey players trash room at village. *The Washington Post*, D1.

executives searched for another miracle as the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics approached. In an attempt to redeem more than two decades of disappointing play, the 2002 U.S. team turned to those responsible for the country's greatest hockey triumph—Herb Brooks and Craig Patrick. The roster for the 2002 Winter Olympics was primarily composed of players from the 1998 U.S. Olympic hockey team; however, this time, under different leadership, the team finished with the silver medal. Like in 1980, Brooks' team overperformed relative to their expectations, and the return of these miracle orchestrators represented a moment of collective remembrance of the 1980 Gold medal-winning hockey team.

In the years following Lake Placid, Brooks had shown interest in returning to coach the U.S. Olympic hockey team. He was a candidate to coach the team in the 1992 Winter Olympics, but ultimately, U.S.A. hockey officials chose to retain Dave Peterson after a disappointing 1988 Winter Olympics. Executives considered Peterson to be the “safer choice”<sup>170</sup> over Brooks because he “[had] more continuous international experience.”<sup>171</sup> However, in 2002, Brooks' affiliation with the myth may have swayed hockey executives to select him as head coach, as they likely hoped that he could boost the popularity of an underperforming team playing for the first time on domestic soil in over two decades.

Brooks' return ignited nationwide interest in the dormant U.S. Olympic hockey team and the Miracle on Ice and led to broad coverage by newspaper columnists across local and national publications. Most of the coverage overlooked Brooks' accomplishments as a successful professional coach over the past 22 years, such as his selection as NHL coach of the year in 1982, and instead focused on his role in creating the Miracle.<sup>172</sup> *The Associated*

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<sup>170</sup> Elliott, H. (2000, October 31). Brooks to return as U.S. Olympic coach. *The Los Angeles Times*, D5.

<sup>171</sup> Nadel, M. (1991, July 7). Naming of Peterson as '92 coach shocks U.S. hockey watchers. *Associated Press*.

<sup>172</sup> (2003, August 12). *The miracle worker*. The New York Times. Retrieved April 9, 2024, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/12/sports/hockey/the-miracle-worker.html>

*Press* specifically highlighted Brooks' achievements in 1980, discussing how he led the U.S. team, full of "college players," to "one of the greatest upsets in Olympic history."<sup>173</sup> Brett Prettyman, a columnist for *The Salt Lake City Tribune*, also discussed the 1980 team's story, stating that "Brooks was the third choice to coach Team USA in 1980"; however, this time, he was the "first choice."<sup>174</sup> Prettyman also appealed to the mythological nature of the 1980 team's victory over the Soviet Union by claiming it represented the "biggest boost to patriotism since the Boston Tea Party." Tom Jones, sportswriter for the *Star Tribune*, stated that the United States was "looking for another Miracle on Ice - and what better way to do it than to bring back the men who led the Americans to their greatest hockey triumph."<sup>175</sup> *The St. Cloud Times* reported that Brooks aimed to win "Miracle on Ice II,"<sup>176</sup> further establishing the 2002 Winter Olympics as a sequel to the 1980 U.S. hockey triumph in Lake Placid. Brooks' return to the U.S. Olympic hockey team represented not just the return of a beloved coach, but the rekindling of one of the most potent myths in recent American history.

The U.S. team in 2002 was not the only team sharing a link with the 1980 Winter Olympics, as former star player from the 1980 Soviet team, Slava Fetisov, coached the Russians. In a game U.S. player Brett Hull believed fate decided, the U.S. and the Soviets, now the Russians, were scheduled to play on the 22nd anniversary of the Miracle on Ice.<sup>177</sup> The U.S. team again defeated the Russians, establishing them as the favorites to win the gold medal.<sup>178</sup> Despite the expectations for success, the U.S. team lost to the Canadians by a final score of 5-2, marking Brooks' first loss in the Olympics as coach for the U.S. hockey team. While this score

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<sup>173</sup> (2000, October 31). Brooks to coach U.S. team in 2002. *The New York Times*, D6.

<sup>174</sup> Prettyman, B. (2000, October 31). Brooks to return to USA hockey: Coach who headed Miracle on Ice team will lead 2002 squad. *The Salt Lake Tribune*, D3.

<sup>175</sup> Jones, T. (2000, October 31). Brooks to coach Olympic team. *Star Tribune*, C1.

<sup>176</sup> (2000, October 31). Brooks aims for Miracle on Ice II. *St. Cloud Times*, 1D.

<sup>177</sup> Gulitti, T. (2002, February 21). Team USA is feeling history on its side. *The Record*, S8.

<sup>178</sup> (2002, February 22). Olympic mens hockey: United States vs. Russia. *Star Tribune*, C5.

appears lopsided, it does not reflect the game's competitiveness, as the team trailed by one goal with little time remaining in the final period, creating a thrilling gold-medal game.

Despite their unexpected success, the 2002 U.S. Olympic hockey team failed to capture people's hearts and imaginations, as the public ultimately forgot them following the conclusion of the Winter Games. While the 1980 U.S. team appealed to deeply ingrained American myths through their technical status as amateurs, their perceived representation of the everyman archetype, and their opponent being the country's most significant sociopolitical rival for over three decades, the U.S. team, 22 years later, ultimately failed to appeal to those same myths. The 2002 team used veteran professional players from the NHL, whose main opposition was Canada, who the country had no international rivalries with.<sup>179</sup> In 2002, the world did not view the Russians as the equal of the United States from a geopolitical perspective; rather, most saw them as a nation in decline following a decade that nearly collapsed their economy following the dismantling of the Soviet system.<sup>180</sup> However, the U.S. once again proved themselves to be superior to the Soviets.<sup>181</sup> The team's professional status and opponents contributed to the lack of impact the 2002 U.S. team had, separating it from the 1980 Olympics and cementing the Miracle on Ice as a once-in-a-lifetime story worthy of its mythological legacy.

The collective remembrance of the Miracle on Ice during the 2002 Winter Olympics reveals how the team's story uniquely reflected American myths, specifically regarding the country's supremacy. The professionalization of the Olympic Games shows that the U.S. team achieved a public impact in 1980 that the 2002 team could not duplicate, thus revealing the

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<sup>179</sup> Lapointe, J. (2002, February 5). Salt Lake City 2002: The 19th Olympic Winter games; Men's hockey. *The New York Times*, 7.

<sup>180</sup> Buszynski, L. (2003). Russia and the commonwealth of independent states in 2002: Going separate ways. *Asian Survey*, 43(1), 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2003.43.1.15>

<sup>181</sup> Westad, O. A. (2007). *The global Cold War : third world interventions and the making of our times* (1st paperback ed., p. 403). Cambridge University Press.

immensity of the myth. While professional athletes have taken on the role of mythological hero in the past, an amateur uniquely fits the role, as they represent a testimony to the belief that anyone can achieve success. The 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team, comprised of perceived nobodies, became heroes for many Americans and restored a sense of belief in the nation's psyche. Despite the similarities between the 2002 and 1980 Winter Olympics, the legacy of Lake Placid stands unrivaled in its appeal to the public.

### **Release of the feature film *Miracle* in 2004**

The feature film *Miracle*, starring Kurt Russell as Herb Brooks, released in theaters in February 2004. It attempted to frame the Miracle on Ice as a critical moment in Cold War history, revealing the filmmaker's attempt to draw on the team's mythological status. The film begins with a montage of American news footage from the 1970s, beginning with the passing of the 26th Amendment and continuing to show essential news stories throughout the decade, including the American invasion of Cambodia, the USSR basketball team defeating the Americans in the 1972 Munich Olympics, Watergate, and the fall of Saigon, which represented the end of the Vietnam War.<sup>182</sup> The montage ends with President Jimmy Carter's inspirational crisis of confidence speech, which is vital in extending the myth, as his words and nearly all of the news stories shown reveal the dysfunction of the 70s. The framing of this dysfunction in the movie effectively created an opportunity to link the team with ideas of American exceptionalism. In one scene, Patty Brooks, played by Academy Award nominee Patricia Clarkson,<sup>183</sup> stresses the importance of the U.S. - Soviet game to her husband, Herb, claiming that “this is more than a

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<sup>182</sup> Allowed 18-year-olds the right to vote.

<sup>183</sup> Kuharsky, P. (2004, February 22). Music City witnesses another Miracle: Preps fired up by film of 1980 U.S. Olympic win. *The Tennessean*, 1C-3C.

hockey game to many people.”<sup>184</sup> Ultimately, the filmmaker attempts to show the 1980 U.S. team entering the Cold War narrative with a chance to inspire a downtrodden American public in desperate search of a positive news story following a time marked by calamity. The film broadened the game's mythological appeal by exposing a new generation to the immense implications the public associated with the 1980 U.S. hockey triumph in Lake Placid.

In typical Hollywood fashion, *Miracle* draws on a historical event but ultimately relies on a dramatized retelling of the factual story. The film utilizes an exaggerated and fabricated narrative to tell an emotionally charged recollection of the Miracle on Ice. Paul Kuharsky, a sports columnist writing for *The Tennessean*, highlighted the film’s emotional appeal by revealing the movie's impact on players for the NHL’s Nashville Predators. Mark Eaton, a Predators defenseman, stated that the movie “definitely fires you up” and leaves the audience inspired by the “players, nation, and team” coming together.<sup>185</sup> Predators left wing Andreas Johansson stated “that he had tears in his eyes after watching *Miracle*.”<sup>186</sup> Eaton and Johansson’s comments on the film are a testimony to the emotions evoked by a Hollywood dramatization of the Miracle on Ice. The emotional pull of the movie has allowed the story to grow in its scope and impact on the public, as it exposes new generations to the myth.

The film attempts to create powerful moments for the audience; however, these moments are often either entirely made up or exaggerations of actual events. For example, in one of the film's only scenes of a pre-Olympic game, the filmmaker embellishes a factual moment from the team's story to create an emotional appeal for the audience. In September of 1979, the U.S. team

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<sup>184</sup> O'Connor, G. (Director). (2004). *Miracle* [Film]. Buena Vista Pictures. 1:33:46

<sup>185</sup> Kuharsky, P. (2004, February 22). Music City witnesses another Miracle: Preds fired up by film of 1980 U.S. Olympic win. *The Tennessean*, 1C.

<sup>186</sup> Kuharsky, P. (2004, February 22). Music City witnesses another Miracle: Preds fired up by film of 1980 U.S. Olympic win. *The Tennessean*, 3C.

played poorly and tied against Norway. Frustrated with his team's effort, Brooks told his players to stay on the Ice and demanded they do conditioning drills. These drills went on long enough for the rink supervisor to turn off the lights in an attempt to get the team to exit, but Brooks disregarded him and the team continued skating in the dark. Earlier in the film, Brooks asked players on the team where they were from and who they played for. When asked, every player answered that they played for their respective university. Brooks wanted them to answer that they played for the United States of America now rather than the college they attended. While skating in the dark, Eruzione spontaneously declared his name, where he's from, and that he plays for the United States of America, appeasing Brooks' wrath and allowing the players to finally exit the ice. At this moment, the film depicts the team uniting around Eruzione's leadership, foreshadowing his eventual status as the symbolic leader of the team.

While the U.S. team did play Norway in two exhibition games in the fall of 1979, this dramatic moment at the team's practice never actually occurred. Brooks did force the team to do conditioning drills for an extended period following their tie against Finland, and the rink supervisor also turned off the lights to get the team out of the arena. However, there was no decisive moment that night when the team came together because of the leadership displayed by their future captain, Mike Eruzione. Instead, out of frustration, Mark Johnson slammed his stick against the boards, leading Herb Brooks to say, "If I hear another stick against the boards, I'll skate you until you die."<sup>187</sup> After this comment, Brooks finally let his players leave the Ice but told them that if they played poorly in the second game against Norway, they would skate again. The lesson clearly sank in, as the team played much better, winning by a lopsided score of 9-0 the next day. The film does not mention the team's dominating performance in the second game

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<sup>187</sup> Eruzione, M., & Boudette, N. E. (2020). *The making of a miracle : the untold story of the captain of the 1980 gold medal-winning US Olympic hockey team* (1st ed., p. 99). Harper, an imprint of HarperCollings Publishers.

against Norway or many of their other successful games before the Olympics, as this would challenge the team's underlying status as underdogs. It serves as an example of Hollywood exaggerating a historical moment to create a stronger emotional appeal to their audience.

Another example of the filmmaker's exaggerations occurs during a fight scene between Jack O'Callahan and Rob McClanahan during one of the team's first practices. The filmmaker suggests that the brawl started because of built-up animosity between Eastern and Western players on the team. O'Callahan was from Charlestown, Massachusetts (MA), and played college hockey at Boston University. McClanahan was from Saint Paul, Minnesota (MN), and played for Herb Brooks at the University of Minnesota. There was a rift between these two schools from an incident in the 1976 NCAA hockey national championship, in which a massive bench-clearing brawl broke out between both teams. The fight lasted about twenty minutes and resulted in the officials' ejecting one of the best players from Boston University, which helped the University of Minnesota run away with a national championship. While the fight sequence exposes the audience to the legitimate east-west rivalry the 1980 U.S. team experienced, this fight never occurred. McClanahan was not even on the 1976 national champion Minnesota team.<sup>188</sup> Instead, he was in high school at Mounds View in Arden Hills, MN. Through this fight scene, the filmmaker emphasizes the legitimate division the players on the team overcame en route to accomplishing what many remember as the greatest sporting moment of the 20th century. This idea of enemies coming together for the greater good appeals to the classic hero's journey, revealing the similarities the *Miracle on Ice* shares with other mythological stories.

The filmmaker utilized two more small fabrications to add to the heroic-like myth of the *Miracle on Ice*. First, in the film, Jack O'Callahan makes his dramatic return from injury against

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<sup>188</sup> Gilbert, J. (2019). *Miracle in Lake Placid: The greatest hockey story ever told* (p. 19). Simon and Schuster.

the Soviets, but he actually returned in the qualifying round game versus Romania. The impact of his return later rather than earlier allowed his story arch to appeal to traditional mythological heroes through overcoming adversity and helping his team secure victory. Second, the film shows Herb Brooks in a dark corridor of the arena falling to the floor due to the overwhelming emotional response to beating the Soviets. Despite sports columnist John Gilbert's belief that this scene was one of the most powerful in the movie, it also never happened.<sup>189</sup> After the game, Brooks was waiting on Gilbert in his office and thus could not have taken in all the emotions in the darkened corridor of the arena; he went on to joke with Gilbert about the events that just unfolded, revealing that Brooks was not a man overcome with emotions after the U.S. defeated the Soviets.<sup>190</sup> These exaggerations utilized by the filmmaker amplify the film's emotional appeal to the audience, ultimately allowing the scope of the myth to grow for the public.

The film briefly shows footage from the U.S. victories over Czechoslovakia and Finland but these scenes include no dialogue making it essentially something that happens in the background. This does a disservice to the team's success against those opponents.

Czechoslovakia and Finland featured some of the most talented hockey players in the world, but the film devoted little time to discussing these games, thus revealing that the myth of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team revolves around the Soviet game.<sup>191</sup>

The team's amateur status and unlikeliness to win in the 1980 Winter Olympics is highlighted extensively throughout the film, but the filmmakers leave out that in the years following Lake Placid, many players pursued long and successful professional careers. NHL

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<sup>189</sup> Gilbert, J. (2019). *Miracle in Lake Placid: The greatest hockey story ever told* (p. 118). Simon and Schuster.

<sup>190</sup> Gilbert, J. (2019). *Miracle in Lake Placid: The greatest hockey story ever told* (p. 118). Simon and Schuster.

<sup>191</sup> The 1980 Czechoslovakian Olympic hockey team included brothers Peter and Anton Statsny. Peter Statsny went on to have an accomplished career in the NHL after Lake Placid, which culminated in his induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1998. Finland's 1980 Olympic team also featured skilled players such as Jari Kerri, who went on after Lake Placid to play on the top line for the Edmonton Oilers with Wayne Gretzky and win a Stanley Cup.

franchises already drafted many of these American players before the Olympics began, but they decided to delay entering the NHL to compete on an Olympic stage. This information was public knowledge in the early 2000s and the filmmaker could have easily included it within the film, as the credits begin with a montage revealing the actor's name, the player they portrayed, and that player's current occupation. Professional playing experience would be salient information to include in this scene; however, the film leaves out information that challenges their legitimacy as underdogs. This omission of this critical detail could be due to the information falling outside of the story the filmmaker tells, but nonetheless, it reveals another example of the film *Miracle* further embellishing parts of the team's story to ensure the myth resonates with the public as much as possible.

### **Politicization of the Miracle on Ice**

In the years after Lake Placid, Presidents from both parties in the United States have attempted to link the team and their accomplishments with their political agendas. The utilization of the team's victory by the nation's highest-ranking political officers reveals the transcendental status of the team's story to the public. The comments by America's presidents highlight the mythological components entwined within the legacy of the Miracle on Ice and reveal a fundamental understanding that, for many Americans, the game represents more than a sporting event but a mythological display of nationalism.

Immediately following the U.S. victory over the Soviets in the 1980 Winter Olympics, President Jimmy Carter and his administration attempted to capitalize on the team's popularity in an election year. On February 25, 1980, Carter declared from the White House that the gold medal campaign by the U.S. hockey team represented one of the "proudest moments" of his

presidency.<sup>192</sup> He also called coach Herb Brooks after their victory to personally congratulate him on the win and invite the team to the White House. Vice President Walter Mondale attended the game against Finland and afterward said the U.S. hockey team reminded Americans that “we don't have to prove our way of life is better through state-run sports; we can do it through amateur bodies.”<sup>193</sup> The Carter administration’s elicitation of the Miracle on Ice from its earliest stages establishes a political context for the myth that nurtures its growth through a different avenue of public remembrance.

Despite his warm feelings towards the team after their victory, Carter devoted just a few paragraphs to them in his six-hundred-page memoir from his time in the White House. He stated that the Miracle on Ice represented “one of the high points of my year” and hoped “this victory and gold medal were an omen of better days ahead. But that was not to be.”<sup>194</sup> Carter’s sparse treatment of the team in his memoir reveals that while the team represented a positive news story, it did not prove to be an effective campaign tool—as his administration ended just months following the conclusion of the game.

Nearly three decades later in the commemorative book *Gold: Celebration of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey Team* Carter discussed the team's legacy more extensively and cleverly made the case that the Miracle on Ice represented one of his most significant accomplishments as President. He wrote:

“Looking back, the 1980 Miracle on Ice was much more than an Olympic upset, more than the underdogs defeating the favorite in a hockey game. It was that these unknown, working-class American young men had defeated the all-powerful, seasoned Soviet professional team who, months earlier, conquered a team of NHL All-Stars in the 1979 Challenge Cup. The upset

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<sup>192</sup> Cannon, L., & Brode, D. S. (25 Feb. 1980). Reagan and Bush clash at close of N.H. campaign: Reagan, Bush trade charges. *The Washington Post*.

<sup>193</sup> Anderson, D. (1980, February 25). 'Big Doolies' of the world. *The New York Times*, C1, C4.

<sup>194</sup> Carter, J. (1982). *Keeping faith: Memoirs of a president* (p. 901). Bantam Books.

came at an auspicious time as the decade that preceded that moment in our nation's history truly had tested the character of our country. To many Americans, that game was not only a physical victory, but an ideological, even spiritual triumph—perhaps even a success as meaningful in its own nuanced way as the Berlin Airlift or the Apollo moon landing."<sup>195</sup>

Many conservative Americans recall President Carter and his administration as largely ineffective, leading to predominantly negative coverage. While it is true that President Carter may not have achieved a conventional political victory during his time in office, his comments on the 1980 game suggest that he viewed the Miracle on Ice as a significant triumph, comparable to some of the major successes of the Cold War.

In many regards, the appeal of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team served as a precursor to Ronald Reagan's rise to the presidency. As Dr. Alexandra Mountain has shown, Reagan won electorally because of his appeal to white working-class men, who served as a surprising new cornerstone for the Republican Party.<sup>196</sup> Traditionally, this demographic remained loyal to the Democratic Party, stemming from Roosevelt's New Deal policies, but economic woes drew them towards Reagan, who embraced this new voting bloc by condemning the "welfare queen"<sup>197</sup> and praising those who were traditionally working-class.<sup>198</sup>

Months before Americans elected Reagan as President, the U.S. Olympic hockey team similarly appealed to working-class families through their work ethic and tenacity. According to Mike Eruzione, the U.S. team "[typifies] the American people. We put on our hard hats, pick up our lunch pails, and come to work."<sup>199</sup> The players, all from working-class families, utilized their

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<sup>195</sup> Conway, A. (2009). *Gold: A celebration of the 1980 US Olympic hockey team*. 21st Editions, Incorporated.

<sup>196</sup> Mountain, A. (2022). Rethinking a miracle: The role of whiteness in the 1980 Miracle on Ice. *Journal of Olympic Studies*, 3(1), 102. <https://doi.org/10.5406/26396025.3.1.06>

<sup>197</sup> (1976, February 15). 'Welfare Queen' becomes issue in Reagan campaign. *The New York Times*, 51.

<sup>198</sup> Mountain, A. (2022). Rethinking a miracle: The role of whiteness in the 1980 Miracle on Ice. *Journal of Olympic Studies*, 3(1), 102. <https://doi.org/10.5406/26396025.3.1.06>

<sup>199</sup> Mountain, A. (2022). Rethinking a miracle: The role of whiteness in the 1980 Miracle on Ice. *Journal of Olympic Studies*, 3(1), 105. <https://doi.org/10.5406/26396025.3.1.06>

status to neatly fit the archetype of “the working-class man and the positive traits associated with them.”<sup>200</sup> The U.S. team and Ronald Reagan each appealed to this pivotal subset of the American populace. Reagan ultimately realized the political potency of the myth of the Miracle on Ice and directly used the team to appeal to the public rhetorically.

President Reagan frequently referenced the successful U.S. hockey team during his presidency. He believed that the Gold Medal-winning teams of 1960 and 1980 represented "storybook victories," where "young American athletes, given little chance for the gold medal, won against far more experienced opponents."<sup>201</sup> Reagan further expressed that Americans came to see the U.S. Olympic hockey team as "a national symbol, representing the corny, homegrown conviction that victory can come to those who live by the amateur spirit, play fair, and abide by the rules." He also emphasized that Americans would never "forget the picture of those young Americans, not favored to win by a long shot, but win they did."<sup>202</sup> Reagan strongly believed that the American victory over the Soviets was "a vivid memory cherished by the American people."<sup>203</sup> His comments effectively reveal the institutional power of the Miracle on Ice, as it builds upon an increasing political connotation that amplifies the myth's appeal to the public.

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<sup>200</sup> Mountain, A. (2022). Rethinking a miracle: The role of whiteness in the 1980 Miracle on Ice. *Journal of Olympic Studies*, 3(1), 102. <https://doi.org/10.5406/26396025.3.1.06>

<sup>201</sup> Reagan, R. (1987, September 24) *Remarks to the United States Olympic hockey team* [Speech transcript]. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-united-states-olympic-hockey-team#:~:text=September%2024%2C%201987&text=But%20all%20of%20us%20are,permanently%20captured%20the%20American%20imagination>.

<sup>202</sup> Reagan, R. (1983, September 29). *Remarks on greeting members of the Washington Capitals and United States Olympic hockey teams* [Political speech]. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-greeting-members-washington-capitals-and-united-states-olympic-hockey-teams>

<sup>203</sup> Reagan, R. (1982, February 8). *Remarks at a White House luncheon for the national hockey league all-Star teams*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. Retrieved from <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-white-house-luncheon-national-hockey-league-all-star-teams>

According to Dr. Mountain, nostalgia for America's better times, specifically the 1950s, was a pivotal component to the rise of Ronald Reagan.<sup>204</sup> Many fondly remember this period in U.S. history because of American strength in foreign policy, economic growth, and an embrace of "family values," ensuring the country would remain morally grounded. Reagan said this represented a time when America was great, and his goal was to "Make America Great Again."<sup>205</sup> He effectively used the legacy of the Miracle on Ice to support his belief in the ideology of tradition, specifically the American values and work ethic typically associated with these treasured times. The players on the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team represented the ideal citizen to President Reagan, as they effectively personified the stereotypical hard working American. The Miracle on Ice offered a unique opportunity for the voting populace to unite under shared core American values that the team personified. President Reagan and President Carter interpreted the 1980 U.S. - Soviet game as a unifying moment for the nation; however, not all Presidents would share their sentiment. The unifying aspect of the myth would not remain immune from the political dysfunction of the 21st century.

On February 21, 2020, President Donald Trump brought members of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team on stage during a campaign rally in preparation for the upcoming 2020 election. Trump declared that the game was "one of the greatest moments in the history of sports."<sup>206</sup> The team took the stage with some players wearing "Keep America Great" hats. Kelly Brooks, daughter of the late Herb Brooks, joined the players from the stage and stated that her father "would be proud to be here" and that "he would've been a Trump fan." Captain Mike

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<sup>204</sup> Mountain, A. (2022). Rethinking a miracle: The role of whiteness in the 1980 Miracle on Ice. *Journal of Olympic Studies*, 3(1), 102. <https://doi.org/10.5406/26396025.3.1.06>

<sup>205</sup> (2019, May 22). *Reagan: 'Making America great' the first time*. United States Study Centre. Retrieved from <https://www.ussc.edu.au/reagan-making-america-great-the-first-time>

<sup>206</sup> Vazquez, M. (2020, February 21). *Trump joined by 'Miracle on Ice' hockey team at Las Vegas rally*. CNN Politics. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/21/politics/donald-trump-las-vegas-rally-hockey-team/index.html>

Eruzione said it was a "great honor" to receive an invite to the event from the President. President Trump's utilization of the team for political purposes created an opportunity to showcase, perhaps for the first time, the limitations of the myth.

According to *The Washington Post*, the players had not intended to make a political statement when they appeared onstage during Trump's campaign rally.<sup>207</sup> Instead, players on the team received a personal invitation for a private photo line with the President. According to Eruzione, a campaign aide provided caps for the players to wear once they arrived before President Trump introduced them. The former captain was one of 10 players to wear the "Keep America Great" hats, a decision he would later regret.<sup>208</sup> This decision to attend the rally and wear those hats led Eruzione, the director of special outreach at his alma mater, Boston University—to receive backlash over associating himself with a highly controversial political figure, leading to angry calls and messages from alumni. One stated, "In 1980, you beat the Russians, and yesterday the Russians beat you."<sup>209, 210</sup>

Trump's attempt to utilize the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team as a baton for political advancement reveals another example of the growing political aspect of the myth in the context

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<sup>207</sup> Nakamura, D. (2020, February 25). *Once Cold War heroes, 'Miracle on Ice' team struggles with backlash from donning 'Keep America Great' hats at Trump rally*. The Washington Post. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/once-cold-war-heroes-miracle-on-ice-team-struggles-with-backlash-from-donning-keep-america-great-hats-at-trump-rally/2020/02/24/0a9a0f80-5738-11ea-9b35-def5a027d470\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/once-cold-war-heroes-miracle-on-ice-team-struggles-with-backlash-from-donning-keep-america-great-hats-at-trump-rally/2020/02/24/0a9a0f80-5738-11ea-9b35-def5a027d470_story.html)

<sup>208</sup> Clayton, A. (2020, February 25). *Mike Eruzione says he regrets wearing hat at Trump rally*. New York Daily News. Retrieved from <https://www.nydailynews.com/2020/02/25/miracle-on-ice-captain-mike-eruzione-says-he-regrets-wearing-keep-america-great-hat-at-donald-trumps-las-vegas-rally/>

<sup>209</sup> Nakamura, D. (2020, February 25). *Once Cold War heroes, 'Miracle on Ice' team struggles with backlash from donning 'Keep America Great' hats at Trump rally*. The Washington Post. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/once-cold-war-heroes-miracle-on-ice-team-struggles-with-backlash-from-donning-keep-america-great-hats-at-trump-rally/2020/02/24/0a9a0f80-5738-11ea-9b35-def5a027d470\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/once-cold-war-heroes-miracle-on-ice-team-struggles-with-backlash-from-donning-keep-america-great-hats-at-trump-rally/2020/02/24/0a9a0f80-5738-11ea-9b35-def5a027d470_story.html)

<sup>210</sup> Leading up to the 2020 election, there was speculation from media members and progressive politicians, including President Jimmy Carter, that Trump was elected in 2016 because of Russian interference. <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/28/737008785/jimmy-carter-says-he-sees-trump-as-an-illegitimate-president#:~:text=Jimmy%20Carter%20Says%20He%20Sees%20Trump%20As%20An%20Illegitimate%20President%203A%20NPR&text=Hourly%20News-,%20Jimmy%20Carter%20Says%20He%20Sees%20Trump%20As%20An%20Illegitimate%20President,Russians%20interfered%20on%20his%20behalf.%22>

of an increasingly polarized political climate. Tim Murtagh, Trump's communications director, told potential donors, "The 1980 Olympic hockey team reminds us of a time when, as a nation, we came together to defeat communism. It is a shame that today's liberals are so intolerant of other political viewpoints that they threaten to cancel such great sports heroes from our history." Murtagh's comments show how some in the American public perceive the myth at the 40th anniversary of the game while also exhibiting the changing political landscape in present-day America. Murtagh's statement reveals an attempt by the Trump campaign to mobilize the myth in their own interest, but the context surrounding the myth in 2020 proved vastly different relative to that of 1980 or 2002. During these moments in contemporary American history, the country united around the U.S. Olympic hockey team—as they participated in a moment that many Americans believe transcended the ever-present political division in America. However, Trump and his campaign staff ultimately take the myth to novel places, as their interpretation of it divides the nation along political lines.

Donald Trump's evocation of the myth uniquely fits the image he often attempts to portray. Trump has associated himself with being a fighter. He has repeatedly told his supporters that "they're not coming after me. They're coming after you — and I'm just standing in their way."<sup>211, 212</sup> Similar to the belief that the team in 1980 played against "commie bastards," Trump believes his opposition is a group that longs to destroy the U.S. and his supporters.<sup>213</sup> Trump effectively links himself with the myth of the 1980 team through his association with and support

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<sup>211</sup> Dixon, M. (2023, June 10). *Trump delivers fiery post-indictment speech: 'They're coming after you'*. NBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-deliver-fiery-post-indictment-speech-georgia-rcna88561>

<sup>212</sup> Sharp, R. (2023, March 21). *Trump posts scathing late-night Truth Social video attacking four criminal probes as indictment looms*. Independent. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-indictment-arrested-truth-social-b2304980.html>

<sup>213</sup> Abelson, D.E. (2010). Politics on Ice: The United States, the Soviet Union, and a hockey game in Lake Placid. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 40(1), 77. <https://doi.org/10.1353/crv.0.0057>

from the players, which strengthens his appeal as a victor for his supporters. Politicians do not often attempt to use hockey games to establish their political ideas. However, President Trump's elicitation of the myth and his attempt to show the players as being on his side reveals the myth's enduring legacy forty years later.

President Trump's interpretation of the myth, which differs significantly from that of President Carter and President Reagan, ultimately reveals its limitations and that the magnitude of its power depends greatly on context. While Carter and Reagan used the team's legacy to unite the nation and overcome division, Trump retooled the narrative to stoke division among the populace. In the wake of the controversy over Trump's utilization of the players, people from both sides of the political aisle agreed that the power of the story was no longer what it once was. According to Murtagh, the divisiveness stemming from progressives in the American political system has drastically limited the impact of stories that previously united the country, including the Miracle on Ice. Ironically, the comments from an angry alumnus from Boston University also reveal the limited power of the myth in the present. This belief that the myth is no longer as impactful as it was explicitly reveals the myth's limitations, specifically from a political perspective. Trump's utilization of the myth ultimately shows that it is not immune from the division plaguing American politics in the 2020s, where, instead of the Soviets, the opposition is now members of the other political party. The utilization of a unifying story like the Miracle on Ice in the divisive context of contemporary politics show that the myth is corruptible, and, like many stories, its effectiveness relies on proper context to amplify its impact on the public.

## Conclusion

The telling of the myth of the Miracle on Ice through various media channels and politicians in the years following Lake Placid effectively created moments of collective remembrance for the team and its accomplishments. These moments include the triumphant return of the 1980 U.S. team and Herb Brooks during the 2002 Winter Olympics, the 2004 release of the feature film *Miracle*, and the appeal by various Presidents to the team—all revealing the myth's generational notoriety. Many Americans have remembered the narrative surrounding the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team during moments of crisis that continue to unfold in the United States. As Americans cope with an increasingly uncertain world, the certainty of the Miracle on Ice effectively appeals to an ingrained belief in many Americans that their country is exceptional relative to the rest of the world. As it exists in the present, the team's story represents more than a traditional sporting event. Instead, many Americans remember the event as a display of nationalism for the public, providing hope of perseverance in uncertain times.

## Conclusion

The central premise of this thesis is that the renowned sporting event referred to in the United States as the Miracle on Ice extends beyond a conventional sports story and is more accurately recognized as a critical aspect of American mythology, leveraged by various individuals and groups throughout different periods in the late 20th and early 21st centuries to meet their needs and interests. By comparing the popular narrative of the team's journey to gold in Lake Placid with the team's account as documented in key primary and secondary sources, this project reveals that the legacy of the Miracle on Ice shares many similarities with other examples of nationalistic mythology. Through the emotional retelling of the 1980 U.S. hockey team's journey, storytellers altered the memory of generations by embellishing details and silencing facts, transforming a dramatic sports victory into a mythological display of American exceptionalism. This phenomenon is symbolic of a universal truth: how we remember history often hinges on the story we tell, the details we include or exclude, and the emotions we instill within the narrative.

A thorough examination of how Americans reflect on and recount the Miracle reveals that many people's memories of the U.S. team's victory over the Soviets in the 1980 Winter Olympics are often distorted. The narrative is frequently framed to emphasize legendary elements as undeniable truth, while contradictory aspects are either downplayed or entirely overlooked. This portrayal of the myth underscores that the Miracle on Ice holds a significant place in the collective consciousness of a society that often views itself as too rational to incorporate mythology into its substantive meaning-making process.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Robertson, J. O. (1980). *American myth, American reality* (1st ed., p. 6). Hill & Wang.

The elicitation of the myth typically comes from individuals and groups that possess a significant amount of cultural power in the United States. For example, many political figures in America have attempted to associate themselves with the legacy of the Miracle on Ice, as the popularity of that story remains present. Hollywood executives have also recognized the cultural value of the Miracle on Ice, as twenty-four years following the conclusion of the 1980 Winter Olympics, Disney studios released a feature film titled *Miracle* starring Kurt Russell and Academy Award nominated actress Patricia Clarkson. Sports media and Olympic executives have also utilized the memory of the Miracle on Ice to assist in accomplishing their business and marketing agendas.

This thesis consists of three chronological chapters, each vital for shaping a meta-narrative of the 1980 U.S. team. It follows the timeline from the players' selection in July 1979 to the present, analyzing how the team's story evolved from an intriguing sports narrative into a piece of national mythology.

The first chapter of this thesis offers a comprehensive look at the team's formative period, highlighting media coverage from before their arrival in Lake Placid for the Winter Olympics. This chapter delves into a crucial yet often overlooked phase in the team's history, as it aims to clarify the team's early days, challenging the misconceptions about its anonymity and underdog status that often accompany this well-known Olympic hockey team. The chapter begins with the rigorous selection process at the 1979 National Sports Festival in Colorado Springs, where American hockey officials, including head coach Herb Brooks, formed a cohesive team out of a talented pool of athletes. The chapter then lays out the team's path through various exhibition games, culminating in their final match against the Soviet Union, a team well known for its decades long dominance in ice hockey. As the chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that the early

media coverage was quite optimistic about the team's prospects for success in Lake Placid, despite their status as underdogs.

The team boasted an impressive roster of talented players, with the vast majority having genuine potential to play professionally in the NHL. Coach Brooks carefully selected players based on a clear vision: to assemble a group who not only possessed exceptional skill but also the necessary personal qualities to thrive in his innovative approach to the sport of hockey. By combining elite talent with players who shared his passion for the game and his commitment to team cohesion, Brooks created a unit capable of achieving high levels of success in the upcoming Olympics. U.S. hockey executives also worked behind the scenes to ensure the team's amateur status remained intact despite the high compensation necessary to prevent the players from signing more lucrative contracts with professional teams, which would forfeit their status as amateurs.

The American Olympic hockey team also took a notably different approach to their preparation relative to previous U.S. hockey teams, which proved crucial to their success. Rather than gradually easing into the Olympics, they dedicated themselves to an intense pre-Olympic schedule that spanned over six months. From September 1979 to February 1980, the team faced a tough lineup of opponents, including several NHL teams, minor league teams, and international powerhouses like the formidable Soviet national team known for its two-decade dominance. The team excelled during their pre-Olympic schedule, achieving an impressive record of 41 wins, 16 losses, and 3 ties. By the time the Olympics began, they had played over 60 games, a rigorous experience that allowed them to enter Lake Placid not as inexperienced amateurs, but as a cohesive and seasoned unit ready to exceed their expectations.

The early days of the 1980 U.S. hockey team tell a more complex story than the popular narrative of underdogs who achieved victory solely through grit and perseverance. However, a critical pre-Olympic match just 72 hours before their debut in Lake Placid showed the significant talent gap between the U.S. team and the Soviet Union. The Soviets' defeated the Americans 10-3, raising serious doubts about the U.S. team's chances in the upcoming Olympics. This demoralizing loss did have an unintended consequence however, as it laid the foundation for the creation of a self-legitimizing myth that resonated deeply with many Americans and inspired them to believe in their nation's capacity to defy insurmountable odds and achieve greatness.

The second chapter begins with the team's first game in the Olympics, as the story of the players from their earliest time in Lake Placid continued to highlight their role as significant underdogs in the eyes of many Americans. In their opening match against Sweden, they faced a tough challenge, playing with one fewer player due to a key member of the defense missing time with a stretched knee ligament. Despite this setback, the players fought hard to keep the score close, and as the game neared its conclusion, they were trailing by just one goal. To avoid an early loss that could significantly hinder their chances in a competitive pool of teams all vying for a pair of spots in the medal round, Brooks made the bold decision to pull his goalie, Jim Craig, in hopes of scoring the equalizer. Bill Baker delivered the tying goal with just 27 seconds remaining in the game. Their performance against Sweden, despite being short-handed, marked the beginning of the team's identity as underdogs capable of overcoming adversity. Their story resonated with themes of traditional underdog figures in mythology, allowing their narrative to reach unprecedented heights compared to most other sports stories.

In the wake of the Miracle on Ice, the players on the U.S. team emerged as representatives of traditional American values in contrast to their Soviet opponents. The public

began to view these athletes as ambassadors for an American perspective that celebrated unlikely individuals achieving success through hard work and determination—embodying the essence of the American dream. This patriotic sentiment surrounding the team resonated with many Americans, even those with little interest in hockey. Their appeal reached beyond a relatively niche sport in the U.S., as their opponents represented the nation’s primary adversary, which had coincidentally recently established itself as the top hockey team in the world. For many Americans, the 1980 U.S. team did not merely defeat a formidable hockey opponent in February 1980, but achieved a symbolic geopolitical victory over the Soviets. The significant implications that the public attributed to the game helped establish the team's legacy, elevating it to mythical status.

Print media coverage significantly contributed to the game taking on storybook-like qualities. While local journalists continued to report on the team’s arrival in Lake Placid, prominent columnists from major publications such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* began to regularly highlight the American team’s achievements. Coverage from both local and national outlets shaped the narrative in a way that infused the team’s story with mythical elements. John Gilbert of the *Star Tribune* noted that some Americans might perceive the American team’s victory as a sign that “the U.S. will win the Cold War or the Soviet troops will withdraw from Afghanistan.”<sup>215</sup> Similarly, Thomas Boswell from the *Washington Post* remarked that the U.S.-Soviet game “duplicated, in miniature, many of the emotions and motivations that have fueled conflicts throughout history.”<sup>216</sup> By attributing such significant implications to the U.S. victory, journalists from both local and national publications crafted a narrative that positioned the American hockey success at the Olympics as a legend.

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<sup>215</sup> Gilbert, J. (1980, February 22). U.S. - Soviet game transcends gold medal. *Star Tribune*, 1D.

<sup>216</sup> Boswell, T. (1980, February 24). Bittersweet memories of Lake Placid will endure. *The Washington Post*.

Al Michaels's broadcasting expertise also played a crucial role in defining the legacy of the American hockey victory in Lake Placid. Many Americans memory of the Miracle on Ice is closely associated with Michaels's spontaneous declaration on the television broadcast, "Do you believe in Miracles? Yes!"—a phrase that has since become synonymous with the US-Soviet matchup. His equally memorable remark, "the impossible dream comes true," during the game against Finland, where the US secured the gold medal, also remains vivid in the minds of countless Americans.<sup>217</sup> Michaels's remarkable skill as a sports broadcaster, combined with his keen understanding of the dynamics of sport in general, enhanced the appeal of the Miracle on Ice. Through crafting a vivid narrative of the team for the country, Michaels achieved an extraordinary feat, one that while less physically impressive than the team's on-ice achievements, still represents an unbelievable accomplishment that helped him gained notoriety early in his legendary broadcasting career. Throughout the decades, his commentary has significantly influenced how people perceive and remember the team's story. The collective memory established through Michaels' call of the game created a self-legitimizing myth that remains influential decades after the team ascended the podium to receive their gold medals.

In the years after the Miracle on Ice, the narrative evolved, as various influential American institutions have utilized the team's legacy to further their objectives. The research presented in the third chapter of this project shows that many people's perceptions of the U.S. hockey team's remarkable success at the 1980 Winter Olympics are significantly shaped by embellishments found in retellings and reenactments by prominent entities, such as Hollywood filmmakers and American politicians.

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<sup>217</sup> Rosenthal, P. (2020, February 19). 'Miracle on Ice' turns 40: Here are 6 things Al Michaels and Mike Eruzione remember that you might not. *Chicago Tribune*.

The 2002 Winter Olympics, the first Games hosted in the United States since Lake Placid, offered an ideal opportunity to honor the 1980 U.S. team as a testament to American resilience during challenging times, as the opening ceremony occurred just under five months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. During the opening ceremonies, members of the 1980 team had the honor of becoming one of the few Americans to light the Olympic cauldron, marking the symbolic start of the Winter Olympics for the world. However, the American players were not the only members of the 1980 team who returned for the 2002 Winter Olympics, as Coach Herb Brooks returned to serve as head coach of the U.S. team for the first time since Lake Placid. Assistant coach Craig Patrick also rejoined, this time as the general manager. Together, Brooks and Patrick exceeded expectations once more, guiding the U.S. team to the Gold medal game, where they finished with a silver medal after a loss to the Canadians. The 2002 Winter Olympics revealed that nostalgia for the Miracle on Ice remained high more than two decades following the 1980 Winter Olympics.

In 2004, Walt Disney Studios released the feature film *Miracle*, starring Kurt Russell and Academy Award-nominated actress Patricia Clarkson. The film offered a dramatized retelling of the Miracle on Ice, allowing a new generation to witness the U.S. team's victory over the Soviets for the first time. It performed well at the box office, grossing over \$64 million and receiving mostly positive reviews from critics.<sup>218,219</sup> The film's writer, Eric Guggenheim, presents the players as anonymous amateurs, overlooking their talent and the reality that many of them went on to have successful professional careers. This representation aligns with a mythologized version of the story, leaving out critical details necessary for a complete understanding of the

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<sup>218</sup> IMDbPro (n.d.). *Miracle* (2004). Box Office Mojo. Retrieved from [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0349825/#:~:text=Domestic%20\(99.9%25\),%64%2C445%2C708](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0349825/#:~:text=Domestic%20(99.9%25),%64%2C445%2C708)

<sup>219</sup> *Miracle*. (2004, February 2). Rotten Tomatoes. <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/miracle>

events that transpired in Lake Placid in the winter of 1980. By emphasizing the team's heroic emotional appeal, *Miracle* serves as a vital medium for remembering Lake Placid, playing an important role in the ongoing evolution of the myth.

Over the past 44 years since 1980, various politicians, including Presidents from both the Republican and Democratic parties, have sought to leverage the narrative of the Miracle to enhance their political appeal. Following the U.S. - Soviet hockey game, President Jimmy Carter attempted to connect with the popularity of American hockey to improve his standing as an unpopular President. Despite his efforts to associate himself with the successful U.S. hockey team, his campaign did not gain traction, and he ultimately lost the 1980 Presidential election to Ronald Reagan. Nevertheless, Carter later reflected positively on the 1980 U.S. team and the Miracle on Ice, describing it as "one of the high points of his year" and likening its significance to that of the Berlin Airlift or the Apollo moon landing.

President Ronald Reagan resonated with a demographic akin to that of the 1980 U.S. hockey team, winning the presidency through a fresh coalition of Republican voters, specifically among white working-class families. Throughout his presidency, he often highlighted the Miracle on Ice in his speeches, referring to the team as "America's hometown team" and emphasizing that they created "a vivid memory cherished by the American people." Reagan also utilized the U.S. hockey team's story to highlight American exceptionalism, demonstrating the nation's strength and determination, which effectively aligned with his conservative political agenda.

President Donald Trump also attempted to utilize the myth of the Miracle. On the eve of the 40th anniversary of the U.S. - Soviet game, he invited several members of the American team to a campaign rally in Las Vegas, NV. President Trump stated that the American hockey players

in 1980 defeated the “greatest [hockey] team ever assembled” and that their performance against the Soviets was “amazing.” The players received a high amount of controversy for their association with the highly divisive President Trump. Captain Mike Eruzione specifically received a high amount of backlash for speaking on stage alongside the President.

Donald Trump’s campaign addressed the criticism directed at the team with notable disdain. Their communications director remarked that he felt the U.S. team evoked a “time when, as a nation, we came together to defeat communism,” adding that “it is unfortunate that today’s liberals are so intolerant of differing political viewpoints that they threaten to cancel such great sports heroes from our history.” Trump’s comments seem to aim at aligning with the 1980 team, much like President Carter did, to enhance his reelection prospects. However, the reaction to his remarks also highlights the limitations of the story teller, as their iteration of it struggled to rise above the current divisive political climate in America.

Carter, Trump, and Reagan's remarks about the Miracle on Ice highlight the enduring political significance of this event, as the team's popularity continues to resonate with the public long after the American victory over the Soviets.

While other scholars have analyzed the cultural implications of the American victory over the Soviets, this project specifically examines how the story of the Miracle evolved into a myth and how people have leveraged that myth to advance their own agendas. This study also focuses on how mythology retains its relevance in modern Western society despite a widely accepted belief in the West that technological progress and rational thinking have eliminated a reliance on mythology to interpret our experiences. Many in contemporary Western society believe that our ancestors relied on mythology simply to make sense of the world. This thesis builds on established research showing that many Americans continue to use mythology to make sense of their lives in

an increasingly uncertain world. Contemporary Western societies' reliance on mythology is specifically made evident through the continued creation of mythic heroes. According to Michael Oriard, the athlete hero uniquely satisfies the need for heroes in a more rational society—such as America—as they often achieve success through meritocracy rather than status or wealth. The players on the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team epitomize Oriard's athlete hero because their triumph in the Miracle on Ice is the result of hard work and determination rather than innate talent or privilege, making them true self-made individuals in the eyes of many Americans.

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